

Transcript: Adrian Collette interview with Michaela Boland for ABC *The Mix*
Network: ABC TV
Program: *The Mix*
Recorded: 13 February 2019
First Broadcast: 16 Feb 2019

MB: For almost 50 years, the Federal government has funded arts through an organisation called the Australia Council. This year it has almost 2 million dollars to distribute between companies like the Australian ballet, the state orchestras and the big theatre companies. Individual artists and smaller companies also share this money. But competition is increasingly fierce.

Joining me today, to discuss how he's going to navigate this landscape is the Australia Council's new CEO, Adrian Collette. Welcome Adrian, thanks for joining us in the café.

AC: Thank you Michaela. Good to be here.

MB: So you have had quite a varied career up until taking this role, you've come from book publishing, you trained as an opera singer...

AC: Ah yes, but I wouldn't make too much of that. I don't think the world noticed when I retired.

MB: And then you ran the opera company as CEO for 16 years, I think it was?

AC: Long time

MB: I think you'd just been at Melbourne University overseeing engagement, which is sort of a fancy modern word for – what did you really do there?

AC: So building partnerships with some of the great cultural institutions in Melbourne - so think of the NGV or ACMI or self-evidently the museum, which came out of the university many years ago. You can surround cultural assets, whether they're paintings or sculpture, with the kind of research that universities can deliver.

MB: And you're then moving into a position now – congratulations on your new job by the way. How would you describe the job as running the Australia Council?

AC: What really drew me to this job was seeing if you could apply all that experience, in education, in publishing, in performing arts, and step up the advocacy and the understanding of the Australia Council and thereby hopefully have a beneficial influence on cultural policy.

I know as well as anyone the deep intrinsic value of art. I do - It's a deeply personal experience. But what we fund through the Australia Council, whether its an

individual artist or small organisations or majors - this is public money. Public money. The government of the day creates policy around it, and the Australia Council, along with our state agencies, advise government on policy. But I think where you have public money, and this was the same at the university, you have to have a very highly articulated sense of public benefit that comes from it. And that can often be a tension with what is a very intrinsic form of expression.

MB: So you're kind of implying that a lot of the work you'll be doing will be that behind the scenes advocacy. Interesting, a couple of years ago when the Australia Council seemed to be under attack from the federal government – when George Brandis cleaved about 100 million dollars, which was half of your annual allocation, there was an enormous up swell of voices defending the Australia Council. But missing in that defence was the Australia Council's own defence of it. Is that something you would do differently?

AC: I'm sure there would be some things we would do differently, but just to your point – first, I think it was wonderful the way the sector responded.

MB: The sector showed great leadership

AC: It showed great leadership. It spoke with one voice. And it was tremendously influential, and I think that's very important.

MB: And the money was returned.

AC: And the money was returned.

MB: But the Australia Council also has a role to advocate on behalf of that sector.

AC: And it did have a role – it did have a role.

MB: It's in the Australia Council's charter. But I haven't seen it for 10, 15, 20 years – the Australia Council advocating on behalf of artists.

AC: Well I hope you see it in future, Michaela. But I think, to be fair, the Australia Council advocates for artists all the time. It is in the lifeblood of the organisation. But just to answer your point about the Australia Council at that moment, I think it really did have to play a long game. There would have been nothing to have been won for artists with the Australia Council being critical of government at that point, and indeed we can't be, we are an agency of government.

MB: But you, you sometimes...

AC: But we can evaluate government policy.

MB: But sometimes that requires being critical. Evaluating government policy, if it is not to the advantage of artists is by definition to be critical of the government.

AC: I think you can spell out consequences of policy. There are many lessons to be taken from that period, and I take your point fully that stronger advocacy, stronger front of house advocacy would have been good. But doubt for a minute that part of the success of that campaign was the determination of the Australia Council to keep talking to the relevant people.

MB: And what about going forward, do you plan – I mean the fact that you're doing interviews right now, three weeks into the job, indicates a greater level of engagement and public face for the Australia Council.

AC: I think whichever way you cut it, it is about advocacy, and that's not just me and indeed it's not just the Australia Council. It's the point I make – I really do understand the pressure on funding, and if I understood it academically before, I'm understanding it as part of my daily life now. The number of people I've had come up to me and say – congratulations, by the way.

MB: I'm sure.

AC: So it's there. And that's the context. And it's going to be ever thus - no matter how much money the Australia Council has, it will be contested for, so that's the gig.

MB: The other groups I suppose that are lobbying for attention, especially this year is First Nations artists, disability artists, and greater diversity in how that money is distributed. I mean, it's just - the pressure for those funds is immense, how are you going to start to deal with those issues?

AC: I feel that we have reached a point where the value of Indigenous creative expression is starting to be central to the identity of our culture. We are not going to resolve our cultural identity, without investing in and respecting that, I think the conversation has changed.

MB: Well there is, but then on the other hand, the government is funding special Captain Cook commemorative artistic...

AC: So do you think that's an either/or?

MB: No I think... but it's interesting that in the budget that that funding was earmarked for the Captain Cook anniversary but not so much for what could be the response to that.

AC: For the year of Indigenous languages as well.

MB: Yes

AC: Interesting

MB: Mmm. Interesting.

AC: So the government have asked, have asked us to engage with government initiatives on what was a really significant part of this country's history, and of course we will do that. We haven't worked out the detail or started to do that yet, but we will do that. It is a very important time in the history of this country. And I'm sure there will be many things to celebrate, in terms of what Western democracy – in terms of education, governance and creativity has been built in this – and including how welcoming this country has been to the nations of the world. But we also know its going to engender very strong debate and its going to engender very strong creative expression. And I think that is a contest which is utterly contemporary and the Australia Council without any doubt, through its grants programs will be supporting Indigenous and other artists who want, in a kind of Wesley Enoch way – they want to really consider what these moments in history mean to the nation.

MB: The good thing about your job too is that you get to see a lot of performances, a lot of art. Is there anything you've seen recently that you've found truly transcendent?

AC: There is, actually. Amongst a lot of very fine things. And I'll tell you why. You know I've talked a little bit about cultural identity and one of the challenges here is we're home to 160 cultures, and that's really important. It's a challenge actually and it's going to be a really invigorating challenge. So I went to a play called, *Counting and Cracking...*

MB: Ah!

AC: I think you might have seen it. .

MB: No, I'm jealous!

AC: It was one of the most virtuosic bits of theatre, conceptually so powerful, with contemporary clout. However, what it was based on was the civil strife in Sri Lanka, and the great diaspora of people born here who came from a Sri Lankan background. It was mesmerising, three generations. I am from Sri Lanka, it is the first time that I have sat in a theatre and had my story dramatized. You can admire the art and the craft but this had a kick to it that was – it was joy actually. It was quite extraordinary. And my family is not Sinhalese or Tamil, but they weren't passing through Sri Lanka, they were there for 400 years, so we were part of the colonial experiment, and the reason we migrated was the same reason that so many Sinhalese and Sri Lankan families migrated. So it was a very personal example of what great writing, great performance can do, and what a challenge that is in a country that's home to so many different cultures. There's no performing company that shouldn't be thinking about that. I don't care how big you are or how small you are. This is the contemporary conversation. And if you don't have something to say to the diversity of communities that now call Australia... home (I can't believe I said that) then, you're out touch.

MB: Well look out, your inbox is about to be flooded. Thanks Adrian.