

The Arts, the Regions and the Economy



DONALD HORNE

Donald Horne. Groundswell 2002 RAA National Conference
Photo: Nicci Parkin

A reprint of Donald Horne's speech recently presented at Groundswell, the 2002 Regional Arts Australia National Conference, Albury Wodonga.

Firstly, if I were introducing myself to you I would introduce myself as I was at the age of eleven. In 1933 – Don Horne, having just completed his six years at the Muswellbrook District School was heading 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', as 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 for 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 other diversion came to town. We sang songs around the piano, and that was art.

All this, just as a reminder.

I have 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 – as 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 we witnessed 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*. Various attempts on the part of 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.

Cultural Rights

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 this proposition.

The first comment is that you may be thinking, what is all this 'intellectual' and 'cultural' nonsense? Aren't we supposed to be talking about the arts? Well, I would hope we are also talking about 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.

Cultural rights ... the right of our citizens to engage in their own forms of intellectual and art production.



Participants at Groundswell 2002. Left-right: Meg Larkin, Donald Horne, Dee Martin and Scott O'Hara.
Photo: Nicci Parkin

It is 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' ...

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. For example, 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. 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 can be got out of a book. 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, but also sent out the 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 each would have dozens of more examples.

The third comment is that all of this occurs against 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 are 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, read, or listen to may affect one or two of their ways of thinking or acting.

Economisation and culture

Now I'll get onto two significant economic changes. One is what has been called in the United States of America, '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 is not supported by public stonings or beheadings but its effects can be pretty ruthless. It is 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 cowhide).

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.

It seems a problem has turned into an opportunity.

Now turning to '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 vogueish 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 is 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 (which 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

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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's 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.



Buskers performing as part of the Applause! Buskers Festival, included in the Cultural Festival which coincided with Groundswell 2002. Photo Nicci Parkin.



Donald Horne presenting at Groundswell 2002. Photo: Nicci Parkin

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 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 using terms such as '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 of hopeful prophecy in prosperous societies such as Australia. 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. 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. 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 has not 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 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

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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 in that arena. 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 are smaller, more comprehensible – and between them, remarkably diverse. (Perhaps Tasmania would have a better

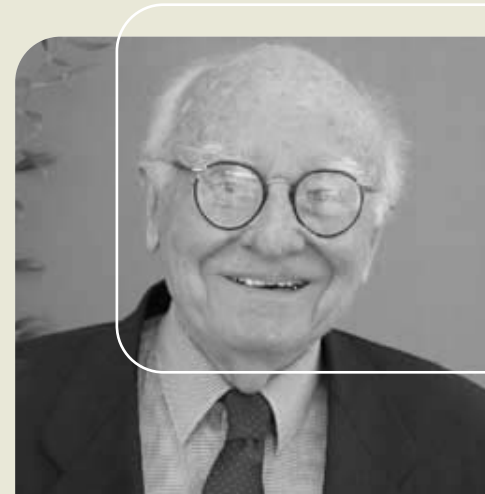
future if it defined itself as a region.) In the Howard years the old phrase 'the bush' has gone through a big revival, keeping pace with the number of politicians who wear Akubras. Yet this is at the very time when the old meanings have almost entirely lost their material base and their social structure. 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'. 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 give visitors something to think about as well. (I am 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, 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 is waiting for us to open our eyes ■

This article is an extract from the presentation delivered at *Groundswell*, the 2002 Regional Arts Australia National Conference, held in Albury Wodonga, October 10-13, hosted and coordinated by Regional Arts NSW in partnership with Regional Arts Board Albury Wodonga.

For more information on *Groundswell*, the Regional Arts Australia national conference in Albury/Wodonga, October 2002, go to: <http://www.region-alarternsw.com.au/groundswell/>



Donald Horne, AO has written more than 20 books including works of social critique, The Lucky Country, cultural critique, The Public Culture, political critique, Looking for Leadership: Australia in the Howard Years, history, memoirs and satire. The Lucky Country was voted one of the three most influential Australian books of the 20th Century by the Sydney Morning Herald. Donald Horne is an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales and served as chancellor of the University of Canberra from 1992–1995. He is former Chair of the Australia Council and the Ideas for Australia Program. Editor of The Bulletin, The Observer and contributing editor to Newsweek International, Mr Horne has written for journals both nationally and internationally. He is an Officer of the Order of Australia and has been chosen by the National Trust as a 'Living National Treasure'.

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