

**Submission
No 67**

**INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND
GALLERIES**

Name: Ms Judith White

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SUBMISSION

to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 of the New South Wales
Parliament Legislative Council

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

STATEMENT

My name is Judith White and I am currently working on a book about museum practice and arts policy in New South Wales. I believe the findings of my research are relevant to the terms of reference of the inquiry, in particular items a) and g).

For 10 years, from 2000 to 2008 and again in 2014 and 2015, I was executive director of the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales, the largest and most successful cultural membership organisation in the state, a key contributor to funding the state collection and the source of the Art Gallery's volunteer bodies.

My previous book, *Art Lovers: The History of the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales 1953-2013* was published three years ago. I hold two degrees from the University of Oxford: a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in modern history and a Bachelor of Philosophy in Latin American cultural history.

I make this submission as an individual and not on behalf of any organisation. Should the committee have questions or require further information, I would willingly answer to the best of my ability.

SUBMISSION

On terms of reference *a) concerning NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries*, I note the following:

- Although New South Wales has the biggest expenditure on cultural facilities of any state in Australia, per capita it ranks only fifth.
- 90 per cent of this expenditure goes to Eastern Sydney and the CBD, as documented in the Deloitte report "Building Western Sydney's Cultural Arts Economy" with which the committee is no doubt familiar; and most of that goes to the five major state institutions.
- Nonetheless funding to the major institutions does not compare favourably with that of other states – see terms of reference g) below.
- There remains a clear case for funding to be spread more widely across the state. The case has been made most powerfully by Western Sydney interest groups but is not confined to that area. Regional cultural facilities are vital for the development of future artists and are a great stimulus to the health of the local society and economy. I would cite the development of the Tweed River Art Gallery in my own area as a case in point. The Margaret Olley Art Centre is the result of the artist's bequest and of joint funding at state, federal and local level. It has greatly increased visitation, become a source of civic pride and proved to be of economic as well as cultural benefit to the area.
- Taking the above considerations into account, I believe that in the case of the major state institutions ambitious expansion building programs should be

considered with great caution. In order to maintain the quality of work in these institutions, and their ability to serve the public and attract visitors, it may be more important to pay attention to improving recurrent funding for operating costs. (See also *terms of reference g below*.) In support of this contention I would cite recent international experience. Documentation of this includes the following:

- University of Chicago Cultural Policy Center 2012 report on 700 US cultural building projects undertaken in the 14 years prior to the GFC. It concluded that there had been significant overinvestment in bricks and mortar, with many institutions experiencing financial difficulties after completion of the building.
- A 2015 survey by *The Economist* magazine which documented cost overruns and increased operating costs for cultural building projects, particularly in the US.
- An April 2016 article in *The Art Newspaper* by Adrian Ellis, a British-born, internationally recognised arts consultant who was recently an adviser to the Barangaroo Development Authority and also keynote speaker at the City of Sydney's 2014 forum on cultural precincts. He warned of the adverse impact of expansion on the ratio of fixed to variable costs, resulting in poor programming and a consequent reduction in the attractiveness of the venue.

On terms of reference g), *the impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years, and funding levels compared to other states*, I refer principally to the situation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales:

- Funding levels of major museums compared to other states are poor. In the case of the state Art Gallery, according to annual reports, in financial year 2014/5 AGNSW received \$23.8 million from state government for operating costs (approximately half the total), while NGV received \$33.8 million (almost two-thirds), QAGOMA received \$28.8 million (70 per cent) and the federally-funded NGA had \$31.5 million (about half of its operating costs) plus more than \$40 million for upgrades.
- I believe the efficiency dividend has had serious unintended consequences, particularly in respect of the employment structure and the resulting impact on the quality of programs. It is of course up to each institution to decide how it implements the measure, but there is a tendency, when staffing has to be reduced, to increase the administration implementing the changes and reward the senior staff involved, thus compounding the impact on the level and quality of staffing at lower levels. This results in a top-heavy bureaucratic structure and the loss of key personnel with experience in creative programming, to the detriment of the institution, of the community it is intended to serve and of its ability to attract the tourist dollar. I can provide further details if required.

On terms of reference i) *any other related matter*:

- Our public museum and galleries are of vital importance to the cultural health of our society, as I have no doubt the committee members are aware. If every child in the state is to have the opportunity of experiencing the

transforming power of art, it is essential that these institutions continue to provide free access to all. In this regard the pressure to generate more and more commercial revenue may have unfortunate consequences.

- A case in point is the introduction of a range of fee-paying programs for school excursions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, creating a division between the wealthier schools which can afford the full range of options, and the many public schools which cannot.
- Volunteering, a positive distinguishing feature of Australian life in so many fields, is an essential form of community support for museums and galleries. Institutions should be encouraged and rewarded for creative deployment of volunteers. Recent experience at the Art Gallery of New South Wales has been unfortunate, with volunteers removed in 2014 from ticketing duties they had successfully carried out for 30 years.
- Membership bodies too need to be recognised as a key form of community support. The experience at the Art Gallery over the course of 63 years is that an independent, self-governing body can be the source of significant funding, volunteering and great goodwill. Such bodies should be actively encouraged, and it is heartening to see their growth in a number of smaller museums and regional galleries.
- Boards of trustees drawn overwhelmingly from the corporate sector are not always aware of the ways in which management changes can affect the internal life and eventually the public performance of their institutions. The inclusion on those boards of a wider range of professionals, arts workers and volunteer representatives would assist in monitoring such developments before they become critical.
- Broadening the composition of boards would also assist with item f) of your terms of reference, that is, transparency in reporting. In recent years, understandably given the competition for funding, boards and management have had little incentive to draw attention to the problems museums and galleries face.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission.

Judith White
4 August 2016