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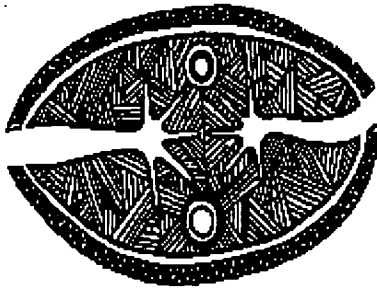
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ABSTRACT

In October 1995, the Australian Parliament received the report of the Senate's Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Reference Committee, entitled "Arts Education." This report was released just prior to an election and, as a result, its recommendations were subsequently ignored. These recommendations, some responsibility of the Commonwealth for arts education, also identifies many that are the province of the states. The only changes in arts education since 1995 have been deleterious ones. This paper highlights key recommendations for visual arts education made in the report and calls for a revival of the initiative. The paper's purpose is to try to ensure that the issues raised before and reported upon by the Committee are not overlooked. (Author/BT)



"The Senate Committee Report"

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THE SENATE COMMITTEE REPORT

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(abstract)

In October, 1995, the Australian Parliament received the report of the Senate's Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Reference Committee, entitled *Arts Education*. This excellent report came out just prior to an election and, as a result, its far-sighted and positive recommendations were subsequently completely ignored. These recommendations - while admitting some responsibility of the Commonwealth for arts education - also lists many which are the province of the states.

The only changes in arts education since 1995 have been deleterious ones, and this paper highlights key recommendations for visual arts education that are made in the report and calls for a revival of the initiative.

This paper was presented with the assistance of the South Australian Country Arts Trust

When I read Senator John Coulter's motion in the Senate (*Senate Hansard* 19/10/95, p.2200 ff) that that body 'take note' of the report my heart rose. (Senator Coulter - Democrat, South Australia - was the Chair of the committee.) The millennium had come! It seemed that the way ahead would be smooth and positive for the arts in the education systems of the land. The report not only raised so many issues that had concerned arts educators for years: it proposed solutions to them.

But, it was not to be. Not many weeks later there was an election, the government changed and the new government had its own agenda for the arts and for education - which has become all too familiar to us by now. As far as I can see, the issues raised in Senator Coulter's speech and listed in full in the publication *Arts Education. Report by the Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Reference Committee*, October, 1995, were never discussed in any parliament ever again.

My purpose in this paper is try to ensure that the issues raised before, - and reported upon by - the committee (many of them by us and people like us) are not lost forever in the ether of time, but remain on the agenda and are revived by us and people like us whenever possible.

I propose simply to list some of these issues - in particular those reflecting on visual art education - in the hope that at least some may be revived when possible and carried through.

.....

Practically the first matter mentioned by the Senator is that 'many of the submissions carried complaints about the status or resourcing of arts education'. This was taken on board, but not commented upon - apart from noting that the same could be said about *any* sector of education. But, it will not surprise anyone in this audience.....

Next, it was reported that, whereas many made submissions relating to the various arts as such, few were about to arts *education*. This, too, may not come as a surprise. (And I have to admit that I myself may not even have know of the Committee's inquiry had I not met Robert King, the secretary of the committee, at a conference like this one - where he had come seeking more input from art educators.) We all know how bad people like us are at reading and making reports - but, we must thank the committee for pursuing this matter so that a number of educators did finally contribute, and contribute significantly.

While recognising that 'much of the funding and administration of education comes under the jurisdiction of the states', Senator Coulter was of the opinion that 'the Commonwealth should play a major role in further improving the quality and direction of education, including arts education, in Australia.' This places arts education in a similar category to that of native title in that many feel that the that state governments cannot be trusted to deal with it fairly alone. It seems reasonable to me.

It seems that Senator Coulter, a scientist, may have had an epiphany during the hearings for he states that 'six million years of human evolution would have built the need for and the satisfaction to be derived from artistic expression into our genes. It is against this philosophical background that I view with alarm the growing dominance of...economic rationalism.....Art has become a market commodity; arts education is valued as a training for employment. Art, like science, has been corrupted to serve the needs of the industrial system.' Encouraging words, not - unfortunately - yet out of date four years later.

After decrying that many witnesses apparently 'felt obliged to use the language of economic rationalism' because he felt that 'this was not the way the witnesses would prefer to argue their case', Coulter observed - tellingly - that 'giving in to this view of the world and using its language serves to reinforce its hegemony.' A caution we would all do well to observe.

In fact, Coulter advocates 'the rejection of the application of the economic rationalist paradigm' to the arts.

Coulter also bent his scientific gaze on to the figure of several billions of dollars, which some claimed the 'arts industry' to be worth, and found that this amount represents only about 1.9% of GDP and that one third of it is accounted for by media advertising, publishing and the like. Anyhow, 'dollar values are a totally inadequate surrogate for aesthetic value', he says. 'We must reject the pressure to redefine education as vocational training lest, as a society, we become merely a human ant colony...'

'This is not to deny that there is an economic and industrial component to artistic activity, but it is to say that these elements should arise as secondary to the creative and re-creative purpose.'

You can see, I hope, why reading this report gave me such hope -and also why its philosophy is currently unpopular with government!

Coulter's motion concludes: 'The application of the key competencies, as currently listed, seems to have damaged the arts relative to the other disciplines. It may be that a competency relating to aesthetic awareness needs to be added to the list. However, it may be that the very idea of measured competence in aesthetic awareness does irreparable damage to the very concept of aesthetic awareness.' He leaves this opinion hanging in the air....

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

It was nineteen months before the new government responded to the Senate' Committee's report, and then it was in the form a document tabled, but not discussed (*Senate Hansard*, 13/5/'97). It was prepared by the Departments of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) and of Communication and the Arts (DOCA) jointly. Much of it is in public service face-saving language, but it makes some telling points.

DEETYA enumerates the Commonwealth programmes which aim to sponsor arts training, but seems not to realise that *arts education* is something different. DOCA lists its programmes, but very few of them are in the visual arts. And it asserts that it works closely with state governments - in the National Collaborative Curriculum Project, for example - thus warding off total blame for deficiencies. It also, quite rightly, states that the universities are independent entities and choose their own curricula.

But the shadow which lurks behind the response document is the immense responsibility which the state and territory governments must bear for education - and arts education in particular.

Matters which must be referred to, or discussed with, the states include

- o 'the development of competencies for specialist art teachers and generalist primary teachers teaching arts'
- o 'matters relating to school curriculum and teaching'
 - o expanding the key Learning Areas beyond literacy and numeracy, ie to include the arts (although it appears that the Commonwealth may support this)
 - o ensuring that national curriculum initiatives are not 'relatively disadvantaging the arts' (again the Government appears to support this)
 - o discrediting the current philosophy linking arts education and employment.
 - o investigating of the relative cost of training arts and other educators.

What does this leave? Not much, so it is up to us all to lobby our state governments to sieze the opportunity of Commonwealth cooperation in these areas - if it is not already too late.

There is a lot more in the report. 'The government sees merit in establishing a mechanism between key agencies' (DEETYA and DOCA and others) 'to facilitate consultation on arts and education matters' so as to prevent initiatives from both fields 'falling between the stools'. This is hopeful. However, it will not continue to fund the National Professional Development Program or in-service professional development. Instead it will leave it to the states (and professional associations) to do this. And it did not support the recommendation to establish a competency relating to aesthetic awareness.

But, much of this is old news now, so I will not dilate upon it, except to remind us all that we need to work continuously within our respective state bodies and build on this excellent report for the betterment of art education in the nation.



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