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## **Restoration of Australia Council funding welcomed but more needed for opera**

The axing of the Catalyst Fund run out of the Arts Minister's office is a long overdue return to independent and peer-assessed arts funding, but has come too late to save dozens of small arts organisations and projects.

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance – the union and advocate for Australian performing arts workers – welcomes the announcement by Arts Minister Mitch Fifield that Catalyst will be discontinued and its remaining funds transferred to the Australia Council.

But the government should also allocate extra money in the May Budget to implement recommendations of its opera review, rather than divert cash from the existing pool controlled by the Australia Council.

MEAA chief executive officer Paul Murphy said the creation of Catalyst in 2015 had been an unmitigated disaster which had politicised arts funding and stripped more than 100 small and medium sized organisations and individuals of their funding.

As a result, dozens of organisations had been pushed to the brink and some had folded because without government support they were financially unviable.

Catalyst, originally called the National Program for Excellence in the Arts, was created in the 2015 Budget under then Arts Minister George Brandis. That Budget saw \$105 million stripped from the Australia Council.

MEAA helped to co-ordinate a public campaign against the changes, and Senator Brandis was removed from the Arts portfolio at the end of 2015.

Last year Senator Fifield returned some of the lost money back to the Australia Council but continued to ignore recommendations from a 2015 Senate inquiry to abolish the program run out of his office.

“We are pleased that Minister Fifield has finally seen the light and decided to shut down the Catalyst fund once and for all,” Mr Murphy said.

“This will return almost \$30 million back to the independent and widely-respected Australia Council, but it is too late for many organisations and projects that were defunded at the end of 2015.

“Funding for the arts should always be free of any political interference, but Catalyst run directly from the Arts Minister's office was the complete opposite.”

The changes announced by Senator Fifield will allow \$61 million to be transferred to the Australia Council over four years.

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But MEAA remains concerned that there are no additional funds to the Australia Council explicitly to address recommendations from the Nugent Opera Review to support Victorian Opera and Opera Queensland continue an annual program of mainstage productions.

About \$10 million extra is needed each year to maintain the viability of the standalone state opera companies in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, along with Opera Australia's touring productions.

"While the reallocation of money to the Australia Council is crucial to small and medium organisations, we should not forget that it also has a mandate to support opera and orchestras," Mr Murphy said.

"Unless the government comes up with the extra money in the budget, it will still mean that funding is being diverted from small and medium sized organisations to implement the opera review."

Mr Murphy said MEAA would always fight for a funding system that supported all artists and arts organisations, both big and small, and which kept the funding of the arts at an arm's length from political interference.

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