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So much for reform

by Hamish Keith

Despite National's promises, the bloated cultural bureaucracy remains.

This year began with great promise. It ended with most of it unfulfilled. The new National Government and its Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister, Christopher Finlayson, promised major reforms to the country's cultural infrastructure. But apart from some fiddling with the New Zealand Film Commission, little progress has been made in unravelling nine years of constant cultural meddling from the top. Managing the country's culture still remains a Wellington sport. Decentralisation has yet to happen.

But if the Government's cultural policy was not about spreading the burden of decision-making nationally, it was at least about making the effects of those decisions more equitable in their national reach, given that one estimate of the cultural spend per taxpayer head came to something like \$7.50 nationally and \$130 for each head that lived in Wellington.

Te Papa's national services were to be reformed to actually be national. In a decade, the institution has managed to tour just one major exhibition – the Rita Angus retrospective. That show was certainly one of the year's highlights, but one show does not do justice to an institution we all pay for but which remains firmly embedded in the Wellington brand. Another Te Papa success was the publication of a major and handsome book on the national collections – unhappily reinforcing just what we are not seeing in an institution unable to show more than a tiny fraction of the art works it owns on our behalf.

Creative New Zealand was also to be reformed, making it leaner and more effective. It remains a bloated cultural bureaucracy, although it has divested itself of the troubled, expensive and poorly marketed Maori art mark "toi iho". Some of its critics thought that might have been a poor choice of place to begin a much-needed bout of managerial anorexia. This curmudgeon thought Creative New Zealand itself would have been a more sensible choice of brand to be disposed of in an effort to reposition the organisation as an arts council seriously tasked with nurturing the arts rather than itself. Culture remains captured by process rather than creativity.

Reforms were also hinted at for the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, and the Historic Places Trust was to get a set of more functional teeth. Not much sign of any of that, either, other than a few million trimmed off the budget for restoring New Zealand's most expensive state house – the Wellington residence of our head of state. Similarly grand plans to Te Papa-ise the National Library were cut, leaving the necessary repair of our most prominent leaky building in some doubt.

The visual arts had a very good year. The Auckland Art Fair set a cracking pace. Warwick Brown's extraordinary anthology *Seen This Century: 100 Contemporary New Zealand Artists* demonstrated that the making of images is in fine health and Fiona Campbell's Real Art Roadshow set a benchmark for patronage that an arts bureaucracy could never match.

In Auckland, theatre still struggled to find an accessible home, although the year ended with the good news that the old Mercury Theatre could come back into its original hands, if only those hands were not so sniffy about location and given to fantasising that their city might build them something

better.

Screen production continued to be a hidden contributor to the GDP. It added something over \$1 billion to the nation's wealth without attracting any serious attention. In Auckland alone, it contributed more than \$800 million.

But overall, film had a dreadful year, with production on the foreign-funded *Kingdom Come* collapsing after more than \$30 million had been spent. Niki Caro's much-anticipated film of *The Vintner's Luck* tanked with critics here and abroad, and some of the initial overseas reviews for Peter Jackson's *The Lovely Bones* haven't been so good, either. On the other hand, Toa Fraser's Dean Spanley got a rapturous reception abroad, while being dissed in certain quarters here for not being New Zealand enough. It's that kind of thing that keeps a curmudgeon happy.

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