

COUNCIL OF AUSTRALASIAN MUSEUM DIRECTORS

GENERAL MEETING MINUTES

8 April 2008

Otago Museum and Discovery World,
Dunedin, New Zealand

ATTENDANCE

Margaret Anderson	Director, History Trust of South Australia
Nola Anderson	Branch Head, Assistant Director, National Collection, Australian War Memorial (<i>deputising for Steve Gower, Director</i>)
Seddon Bennington	Director, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Bill Bleathman	Director, Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery
Max Dingle	Assistant Director, Commercial and Visitor Services, Australian National Maritime Museum (<i>deputising for Mary Louise Williams, Director</i>)
Graham Durant	Director, National Science & Technology Centre
Ian Galloway	Director, Queensland Museum
Helen Horner	Acting, CEO, Otago Museum & Discovery Centre
Frank Howarth	Director, Australian Museum
Caron Irwin	Director, New Museum Project, Western Australian Museum (<i>deputising for Diane Jones, Acting CEO</i>)
Jeremy Johnson	Chief Executive Officer, Sovereign Hill Museums
Suzanne Miller	Director, South Australian Museum
Suzy Nethercott-Watson	General Manager, Operations, National Museum of Australia (<i>deputising for Mr Craddock Morton, Director</i>)
Vanda Vitali	Director, Auckland War Memorial Museum
Peter Watts	Director, Historic Houses Trust of NSW
Anthony Wright	Director, Canterbury Museum

IN ATTENDANCE

Meredith Foley	Executive Officer, CAMD
Priscilla Pitt	Chair, Museums Aotearoa
Phillipa Tocker	Executive Director, Museums Aotearoa

APOLOGIES

Alan Brien	CEO, Scitech Discovery Centre, Perth
Dawn Casey	Director, Powerhouse Museum
Patrick Filmer-Sankey	Queen Victoria Museum and Gallery
Steve Gower	Director, Australian War Memorial Museum
Patrick Greene	Chief Executive Officer, Museum Victoria
Anna Malgorzewicz	Director, Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory
Craddock Morton	Director, National Museum of Australia
Shimrath Paul	Director, Otago Museum & Discovery Centre
Jennifer Sanders	Deputy Director, Collections and Outreach, Powerhouse Museum
Mary-Louise Williams	Director, Australian National Maritime Museum

1. WELCOME AND CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

CAMD Chair, Margaret Anderson (History Trust of South Australia) opened the meeting and welcomed delegates, particularly those deputising for their Directors and noted apologies (recorded above).

Margaret thanked Shimrath Paul and the Otago Museum and Discovery World for hosting the CAMD General Meeting and expressed her regret that Shim was unable to attend the meeting due to overseas business commitments. Helen Horner welcomed delegates to Otago Museum on behalf of Shim who had sent his apologies and best wishes for the meeting's outcome.

Congratulations were extended to:

- Dawn Casey on her appointment as Director, Powerhouse Museum;
- Steve Gower who was made an Officer of the Order of Australia on Australia Day 2008;
- Anna Malgorzewicz and Frank Howarth who have been invited to participate in the Australian 2020 Summit;
- Patrick Greene, who was recently appointed a Professorial Fellow at Melbourne University; and
- long standing CAMD member, Peter Watts, who will be retiring shortly from his role as Director of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, a position he has held for 28 years. It was noted that Peter has been active contributor to CAMD since joining in 1981. CAMD members wished Peter all the best for his post-HHT career.

Members also agreed to send best wishes to Mary-Louise Williams who had not attended the meeting due to recent surgery.

It was agreed;

Resolution 1:

That the minutes of the CAMD General Meeting held in Hobart on 9 February 2007 be accepted.

Carried

2. CHAIR'S REPORT

Margaret Anderson spoke to her report, noting that the majority of issues covered were included on the agenda for further discussion later in the meeting.

3. CAMD EXECUTIVE

Executive Role

CAMD Executive Officer, Meredith Foley, reported on recent discussions concerning the role of the CAMD Executive. The Executive had resolved to hold teleconferences or meetings at least once every two months and also to explore the setting up of working committees on various issues. Frank Howarth (Australian Museum) suggested that a Natural History Working Group of CAMD might be formed to consider the details of issues particular to that group. Jeremy Johnson (Sovereign Hill) noted that it was important that Meredith have a

regular opportunity to discuss her work. He also suggested that perhaps the Executive should be rotated to ensure it has a real Australasian focus with a Chair from one country and deputy Chair from the other.

CAMD Advocacy

Frank raised the need for CAMD to be a more assertive lobbying voice in Australia. Graham Durant (Questacon) noted that it was difficult for federal government bodies such as Questacon and the National Museum of Australia to be seen to be lobbying their Minister via another route. Suzy Nethercott-Watson (National Museum of Australia) reiterated this concern on the part of Craddock Morton. Frank noted that this was not as much a difficulty for the States and that perhaps the best approach was to consider campaigns on an issue by issue basis. He agreed that difficulties could ensue if CAMD was seen to be interfering in relation to individual institutions but that it should not be problematic if the advocacy related to sector-wide issues.

4. CAMD MEMBERSHIP

Meredith reported that the Chief General Manager of Old Parliament House (OPH) had indicated an interest in CAMD membership, although no formal request has been received.

At present CAMD does not have formal criteria for membership. Critical mass/scale (eg budget, workforce, business) has always provided an important first step criteria. The presence or otherwise of enabling legislation was not a definitive criteria as some members were set up within government structures rather than under their own legislation. Graham noted that this was the case with Questacon which was a division within the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research with an Advisory Council. In the case of OPH, the Chief General Manager reports directly to the Departmental Secretary.

It was noted that around \$30 million has been allocated for the further development of OPH. Members also noted that OPH exhibitions had shown a high degree of professionalism. It was agreed however that it was possibly too early to judge whether an invitation should be extended to OPH.

ACTION:

The Executive was asked to consider drawing up a formal set of criteria for CAMD membership. The criteria to consider would include:

- scale (budget, staff, visitation);
- governance (including ability to exercise independent action or autonomy on significant issues); and
- accreditation/professionalism.

Members also asked the Executive to consider whether there should be a joining fee in order to protect CAMD's intellectual property.

5. INTERIM FINANCIAL REPORT

The CAMD Treasurer, Jeremy Johnson, noted that the following documents were circulated to members with the meeting papers:

- an interim Financial Statement as at 28 December 2007 and
- an audited Financial Report as at 30 June 2007.

Jeremy predicted that the Budget for next financial year would be at a similar level.

Resolution 2:

That Jeremy Johnson be thanked for his work as Treasurer and that the interim Financial Statement and Financial Report as circulated be accepted.

Carried

6. COLLECTIONS COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

Margaret Anderson provided a verbal update on the action arising from the most recent Collections Council of Australia (CCA) Board meeting.

Regional Hubs

Margaret noted that the Western Australian Government had included an increased commitment of \$60,000 to the Collections Council and \$120,000 over three years to pilot a regional hub. CCA has also been awarded \$120,000 by the Myer Foundation for the CollectionsCare project. The application of this funding is still to be resolved. Jeremy Johnson reported that Sovereign Hill Museum had volunteered to act as a hub but has not received any feedback. In discussion, members indicated concerns about the apparent 'one size fits all' approach characterising the hubs and the possibility of duplication of existing activities.

Future of CCA

Members discussed the future of CCA under the new Federal Government. A review of CCA, undertaken before the new Government took office, has recently been signed off by the Cultural Ministers Council (CMC). Margaret noted that the CCA was the creation of the former Federal Government and only has approved funding to June 2008. It was also noted that the NSW Government refused to pay its contribution to CMC last year and that the Commonwealth did not make up the difference.

It was agreed that CCA had been constrained in what it could achieve by the fact that it was not funded to run projects. Frank Howarth commented that the CCA had not really developed its identity. It had not been financed to run programs but had attempted this nevertheless. It was agreed that activities such as the National Summit on Digitisation, which promoted collaborative policy setting and advocacy across the collections sector was a more useful focus for the CCA. Margaret noted that the Libraries were considering withdrawing from CCA activities but Archives still considered that CCA had some value. Bill Bleathman (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery) reported that CAAMD also felt the CCA model was not delivering.

Graham Durant suggested that one of the challenges for CCA is to work with a sector which has become even more fragmented in recent times. CCA emerged through the former Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) which formerly covered a range of collecting sector institutions. However, Archives has now moved to the Department of Finance and the national museums in CAMD are covered by three different Departments.

Peter Watts (Historic Houses Trust of NSW) commented that museum issues were more diverse and varied than other domains and that he was not convinced of the effectiveness of CCA as currently established. He mentioned a CAMD submission made when CCA was first established. CCA has not dealt with the CAMD points raised in that paper. Peter agreed to find a copy of the paper for circulation to members. He suggested that museums should strike out on their own and become either a section of the Australia Council or push for a Piggot Report- style Museums Commission.

After further discussion, members agreed that:

- the timing was right for a reconsideration of Federal Government structures for museums (and collections generally);
- there was a need for some fundamental review and master planning for the sector. It was suggested that this might be achieved through an approach to the CMC;
- a body was required that could cut across the federal different departments and link museums with appropriate programs and funding sources;
- CAMD needed to give further consideration to whether museums should 'go it alone' with a separate body, such as a Museum Commission as first outlined in the Piggot Report; and
- it was agreed that CAMD would continue to discuss the way forward with Libraries and Archives and bring their concerns to CCA discussions.

7. NATIONAL MUSEUM STANDARDS

Members considered a draft version of the *National Standards for Australian Museum and Galleries* which have been prepared by a national taskforce with representatives from museums in most States and Territories.

After discussion of the Standards and their application, members agreed to endorse the standards and to suggest to the taskforce that they would benefit from a 'staged maturity overlay'.

8. EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT

In response to the circulated report, members discussed the issue of getting CAMD messages into the media. Ian Galloway (Queensland Museum) suggested that we need to get media people from local institutions involved early in an issue. Frank Howarth noted that we needed to be more strategic in getting media releases placed; at times an opinion piece strategically placed with one outlet might be the most effective way to garner attention. Frank also recommended using the free-lance media advisor utilised by the Australian Museum for the Eureka Awards. Bill Bleathman noted that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery had found working with Robin Williams to be very successful.

Ian Galloway mentioned that Queensland Museum had held a Contingent Valuation workshop and a museums and galleries master class with lectures by David Throsby. The aim was to create a framework for a contingent valuation study. Ian offered to present a paper to the next meeting on the outcomes.

On the issue of cultural tourism, Jeremy Johnson noted that the Tourism Research Australia statistics on cultural tourism were challengeable and should be treated with some qualifications. Nola Anderson suggested members consider attending or sending representatives to the INTERCOM conference on Museums and Tourism to be held in 2008 at Rotorua, New Zealand 25-28 November 2008.

9. STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH NEW AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

Members discussed the draft advocacy paper prepared by the Executive Officer and made the following suggestions:

- inclusion of a section on 'generating economic activity' dealing with the ways in which museums drive, employ and consume in ways which impact on local economies;
- ensure the paper targets areas where we can address Government policy;

- include reference to the ways in which museums build partnerships and act as nodes of 'connectivity' eg Questacon has 80 active partnerships;
- showcase the impact of Australian museums abroad particularly in relation to cultural diplomacy;
- emphasise the centrality of collections which are 'repositories of the past' but make museums 'problem solvers for the present and future'. Collections hold the benchmarks for what has gone before;
- note the national and international role played by British and other museums when given sufficient funding eg British Museum Director's position as Cultural Attaché for the UK;
- emphasise that natural history collections are the centre of taxonomic expertise ie they are part of the intellectual ability to identify, describe and map relationships between species which feed into a range of studies including those on climate change;
- the concept of involving 'citizen scientists' through museums should be canvassed. Australia does not have enough people on the ground in museums and universities to monitor biodiversity. 'Citizen scientists' can provide these eyes and ears under the guidance of museum teams;
- museum databases eg of wallpapers and textiles, are used by contemporary designers; and
- recommendations should contain reference to a futures fund.

10. AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT

It was agreed that CAMD should make brief submissions to the Australia 2020 Summit sessions on Creativity; Sustainability and Climate Change; Indigenous Australia; and Strengthening Communities.

Indigenous Australia

Frank Howarth suggested that CAMD's submission on Indigenous Australia stress that collections represent the embodied knowledge of Indigenous Australia and should be progressively encouraging their access. Museum involvement should also be represented as linking to the idea of Treaty and as offering powerful vehicles for reconciliation and trusted neutral spaces within which to discuss these ideas.

Suzanne Miller (South Australian Museum) suggested preparing a general introductory statement with links back to the session areas.

Sustainability and Climate Change

Various messages were suggested by the meeting:

- Museums are a trusted avenue for advice on these issues;
- Natural history museums are records through time and space of the past and a predictor for the future;
- Museums allow people to appreciate their 'place' in a fragile land;
- Museums are unique places where families can converge and explore issues across generations.

Graham Durant reminded the meeting that the submissions were asking for a projection to 2020 of what museums could achieve eg Broadband access would be universal and museums online would act as nodes of citizen engagement on a whole raft of issues.

Jeremy Johnson noted that the submissions needed to be brief and to the point. Ian Galloway, Graham Durant, Frank Howarth, Nola Anderson and Margaret Anderson agreed to meet with the Executive Officer the following morning to fine-tune the approach to the submissions.

11. NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT ISSUES

Helen Horner noted that Otago received very little support from the central Government. Only the Museum of New Zealand was nationally funded while the other three members received regional funding. A commission (closing on 22 April) is looking at how regional funding will be allocated.

National Government was currently in a pre-election hiatus with some possibility of change later in the year. Te Papa is currently working with Libraries and Archives to build a central storage facility like the Castle Hill and Museum Victoria sites. Museums are also considering how their function will change with the spread of broadband by 2020.

Meredith agreed to circulate an IMLS National Study on the Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet (see <http://www.interconnectionsreport.org/>) and a report mentioned by Suzanne Miller which touched on homework and internet use. It was also noted that interesting internet initiatives were coming out of the European museum collections. Frank Howarth noted that museums are moving towards a role as facilitators and monitors of on-line debates.

On other issues, Seddon noted that Audit NZ wants policy on non-financial fraud. Nola Anderson mentioned the Australian War Memorial had a fraud risk assessment program and Suzanne Miller noted that there was a South Australian policy on fraud in relation to the management of collections.

12. MUSEUMS AOTEAROA

Priscilla Pitts, Chair and Phillipa Tocker, Executive Director, Museums Aotearoa (MA) joined the meeting. Priscilla provided an outline of MA membership and activities noting that the association currently has 169 museum in addition to 189 individual members. MA is governed by a 6 member board, including a Maori representative. Membership funding allows the employment of 1 full-time and 1 part-time employee; no funding is received from the Government. The major role of MA is advocacy, particularly on the part of small museums, and liaison with museums and local funding authorities. The association also holds conferences and publishes a Directory and a journal as well as maintaining enews on its website.

Phillipa Tocker provided members with a copy of a report on a recent MA web survey which aims to begin the process of building data on museum dimensions and activities. It is intended that the research will better enable MA to make a stronger case for the sector.

Phillipa also outlined the National Collections Project, developed to highlight the distributed national collection, which will have three linking main elements: an exhibition of 200-400 items (2011), a book and a website with associated information.

In discussion Phillipa and Priscilla noted the difficulties in expanding MA activities given the small membership base the size of many members. They also agreed that there were similar gaps in areas such as training for conservators in both countries.

13. INNOVATION SYSTEM

National Innovation System Review

Following discussion, members suggested that the proposed CAMD submission to the Australian National Innovation System Review include reference to the following issues:

- museums are not alerted/targeted when new initiatives such as Cooperative Research Centres are proposed. CAMD should argue the need for museums to be linked into research networks;
- the possibility of a non-competitive grants strand for major museums which currently lack the staff to prepare large-scale applications;
- universities receive infrastructure funding for their postgraduates while museums, which also host postgraduate students, do not;
- museums lack the seed funding to prepare bids for major Australian Research Council (ARC) grants and cannot apply for ARC linkage grants;
- major museums need access to core funding for research;
- museums are a key part of a diminishing 'public good' base for research in Australia;
- museums combine disciplinary approaches which leads to innovation; and
- museum exhibitions have broad and often unexpected outcomes eg Peter Watts noted that amongst those accessing the Justice and Police Museum's 'City of Shadows' crime scene photo exhibition was the fashion design house of Karl Lagerfeld, multi-media fringe artists and Polish interests who took the exhibition to Warsaw.

Suggested case studies for inclusion in the CAMD submission included the Australian National Maritime Museum's Darwin project and the South Australian Museum's Geochemistry of Ochre project.

Meredith encouraged members to provide other case studies as soon as possible to enable the submission to meet the Government deadline of 30 April.

Creative Innovation Economy Report

It was noted that this report, recently endorsed by the CMC, made only passing references to the creative activity of museums, particularly in the area of digital technology,. Members agreed that a response be made to highlight this omission. Members are to provide examples of projects for reference in the response.

14. CAMD ANNUAL SURVEY

The Executive Officer reported on the outcomes of the 2006-07 annual CAMD survey and encouraged members to alert staff to the timing for the 2007-08 survey which will be circulated at the beginning of September. She also reported that only minor progress had been made on the CAMD website due to more pressing deadlines.

Meredith also raised a few 'data gaps' for discussion:

- **Tourism:** around a third of CAMD's members were unable to provide detailed information in relation to the proportion of visits made by tourists. Members suggested that this be addressed by seeking estimates from the institutions in question;
- **Digitisation of objects:** the survey does not collect information about the extent to which museum holdings are digitised or databased. It was suggested that a new survey question be added which sought estimates of the number of objects in the collection; the number digitised; the number databased; and the number of objects available on the web;

- **Conservation and storage:** a question is to be included which seeks an estimate of the number of collection items appropriately stored.

15. WEBSITE USAGE SURVEY

Meredith reported on preparations for the next website usage survey. Carolyn Meehan (Museum Victoria) has agreed to chair the working party for this year's survey.

16. NCRIS

An update was provided on the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure System (NCRIS) review of its 'Roadmap' for future investment. It was noted that Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences would be considered for inclusion in the 'Roadmap' for the first time. CAMD will respond to the discussion paper due in mid-April.

17. NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

Atlas of Living Australia

Frank Howarth, who is CAMD's representative on the ALA management committee, reported on progress with the project.

Natural History Meeting

Frank also suggested that CAMD members with natural history collections consider meeting periodically, along with their Heads of Science or Research, to discuss issues specific to these types of collections including the rationale for collections, key future collection areas and how to link these collections and associated research to the bigger questions facing Government. Graham Durant suggested that such a group should also meet with State Chief Scientists.

Members agreed on the usefulness of such a meeting and Frank offered to coordinate the first meeting of this CAMD sub-group to address the kind of issues raised above.

CReefs

Frank tabled a letter from CReefs and raised concerns in relation to the lack of funding support and representation for museums in the CReefs project. He noted that liaison would continue on this issue.

OECD Global Forum

Frank referred members to circulated documents which outlined a proposal to establish a new international coordinating organisation for scientific research collections. A workshop to define the new organisation would be held in early May in Washington.

18. CONSERVATION

Members agreed that a letter should be sent to the University of Canberra congratulating it on its plan to commence two new degrees in conservation in 2009. It was also noted that the University of Melbourne was considering a similar course.

19. MUSEUM LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Members noted that the Museum Leadership Program was to continue. It was agreed that the Executive Officer send a letter to the Darling Foundation thanking them for their continued support.

20. TOURING EXHIBITIONS

Frank Howarth reported that the Australian Business Arts Foundation (AbaF) was not interested in providing financial support for the development of a CAMD touring exhibitions partnership agreement. He noted that the Australian Museum would be using 2 agreements developed by Shane Simpson and would be happy to share the checklist and model agreement with other CAMD members.

21. AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS

ABS Survey Program

Meredith reported that CAMD had made representations to ABS over possible cuts to the museum survey program. Several individual CAMD members also sent submissions. Advance information seems to suggest that the museum survey will escape the cutbacks.

Data Standards

Meredith also noted that the ABS has finalised its *Dictionary of Standards* for cultural institutions data which will be released sometime in 2008.

An Information and Development Plan had also been released which will feed into the work programs of the ABS and the CMC Statistical Working Group to the extent that funding is available.

22. CAMD RECIPROCAL AGREEMENTS

Alan Brien has written to CAMD seeking advice on any agreements or protocols for members and staff of CAMD institutions in relation to entry to each other's venues.

Bill Bleathman noted that the Council of Australasian Art Museum Directors (CAAMD) has free access cards for Directors and Board members and their partners. Cardholders are encouraged to contact the institution in question before arrival.

Frank Howarth noted that the Australian Museum had free entry for staff (not spouses) if they came by prior arrangement.

All agreed on the usefulness of these ideas. Jeremy Johnson agreed to develop a card and coordinate its printing.

23. TMAG BARK CANOE PROJECT

Bill Bleathman outlined the development of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery indigenous gallery and exhibition and the decision to contribute to cultural renewal through the construction by reviving the construction of a traditional Aboriginal bark canoe. He noted that cooperation with the local indigenous community on the boat-building had opened up an important dialogue. The project has since won an ACTKM Knowledge Award for Cultural Retrieval and the program developed in relation to the project was booked for 8 months in advance.

24. ICOM

Ian Galloway spoke to the paper provided by Craddock Morton and noted that ICOM was now sharing a secretariat with Museums Australia. He encouraged more CAMD members to become involved in ICOM's partnership program with the Asia-Pacific region.

25. ABAF

Margaret Anderson reported that a History Trust of South Australia project was recently refused consideration for funding under AbaF on the grounds that it fell outside the arts remit of AbaF. Similar projects had been supported in the past and, eventually, AbaF did accept this project. Their response on this occasion raises questions about whether the organisation has changed or intends to change its criteria. It was agreed that a polite approach be made to AbaF to see if any change was envisaged.

26. WA MUSEUM PROJECT

Caron Irwin, the Director, New Museum Project, Western Australian Museum, provided a presentation on the new \$505 million museum project in WA. A copy of Ms Irwin's power point presentation will be circulated separately. Caron has asked that you please treat this presentation as **strictly confidential** to CAMD members and refrain from circulating it further at present.

27. MA MEMBERSHIP

Members discussed a proposal by Museums Australia (MA) to widen its base by providing universal/automatic membership of Museums Australia for all employed staff and registered volunteers in the museum sector.

Members noted that this would require each museum to raise sharply its contribution to MA. They also questioned whether it was appropriate to join staff up whether they wanted membership or not.

It was agreed that the MA conference was an excellent training and development event for staff and that museums were happy to continue to encourage involvement. It was also noted that there were real difficulties for MA in recruiting amongst staff and in funding the national conference.

After discussion, it was suggested that CAMD members could assist MA in other ways eg by organising deductions for existing MA members; by supporting conferences and other events; or by including MA material in new staff/volunteer orientation packages.

The Chair and Executive Officer will meet with the MA President and Executive Director to discuss other options.

28. GENERAL BUSINESS

- Jeremy Johnson noted that a recent Australian Financial Review article dealing with arts boards also had relevance for the boards of museums. A copy of the article is at attachment A to the minutes.
- Members thanked Helen, Shimrath and the staff of Otago Museum and Discovery World for their hospitality and support for the meeting.
- The next meeting of CAMD will be the Annual General Meeting to be held at Melbourne Museum at a date to be advised [*date now confirmed as 1 and 2 October 2008*].

Arts

Cross purposes

When boards begin to lose the point

The way arts companies are structured requires a radical rethink, Justin Macdonnell tells **Katrina Strickland.**

The boards of not-for-profit arts companies are archaic in structure and weighed down by too many businessmen who don't have a solid grasp of the art form in question.

So says Justin Macdonnell, an arts administrator who has worked for the past five years in the US, where he was artistic director of the Carnival Centre for the Performing Arts in Miami.

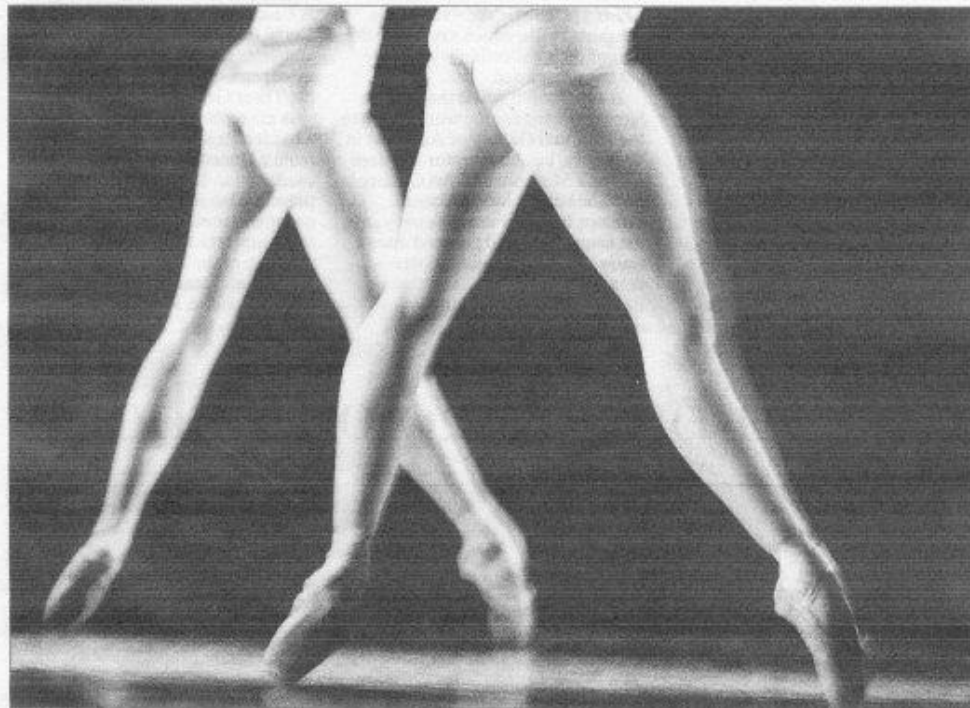
Macdonnell recently returned to Sydney where he has set up a cultural think-tank, ANZArts, in collaboration with festival directors Robyn Archer and Lyndon Terracini, dance curator Lee Christofis, former South Australian arts bureaucrat Len Amadio, and Kiwi academic Sharman Pretty. In a speech at a Currency House breakfast at the Sydney Opera House yesterday, Macdonnell called for a radical rethink of the way arts companies were structured.

"We who work in the arts will continue to find it hard to locate innovation, fresh thinking and fresh ideas at the core of our operating culture... while we are squeezed into archaic and inappropriate management and governance schemes, borrowed from other sectors and poorly applied to our own," Macdonnell says.

The arts company model typically has management responsibilities divided between an artistic director (who handles artistic decisions) and a general manager (who runs the business side of things); both of whom report to a board made up of voluntary, non-paid members.

Recently, the push for better governance has led to those boards being stacked with businessmen, some of whom have a great affinity with and understanding of the art form in question, others less of a one.

"For about 50 years in the English-speaking world, the arts — and here I'm thinking of the performing arts — have been urged,



Businessmen on arts boards don't always dance to the tune that's required.

Photo: MICHELE MOSSOP

even compelled, by their funding masters to emulate the business sector," Macdonnell says.

"There has been an almost irresistible pressure to conform to certain legal structures, methods of governance and methods of management. Who has not been told that they need to get more people with 'business skills' onto their board? That push has almost eliminated arts boards' ability to make informed judgments about the very art they govern."

Macdonnell says he is not arguing against accountability, due process or fiduciary responsibility.

"What I would argue against is the notion that those characteristics are found only in the so-called business sector, among people with MBAs, and never among people who have spent a lifetime being abstemious with public arts money for the very good reason that most have never had much."

He adds he is sadly amused by this

conundrum: the very funding agencies who had pushed their clients in this unhelpful direction now question whether the boards they engendered have the capacity to choose good artistic leadership for their client companies.

Macdonnell points to the acrimonious way artistic directors are sometimes changed (compared with the corporate world's more orderly succession planning), the lack of serious thought behind the appointment of many new board members, and the decline of informed advocacy by chairmen, which he considers linked to the rise of the high-profile businessman as chairman.

Macdonnell freely concedes that he does not have the answers to the problems he poses, but suggests, for example, that experts in various fields could offer their help in a pro-bono fashion rather than be appointed to the board. Would this not deny board members the rub-off

they get from being involved, however, and make them less inclined to fund-raise?

Perhaps, Macdonnell says, but establishing separate fund-raising foundations can solve that problem. "For the most part, boards in Australia have not been a great source of fund-raising or of leadership in fund-raising."

Macdonnell also questions how devoted arts companies are to research and development.

"Some corporations today allow their employees a proportion of their time to work on their own projects, provided they are within the company's mission," he says.

"Yahoo! is one. But how many arts companies do likewise? All the arts would like to think that somewhere, somehow they are devoted to research and development. But is that really so? Or are such activities almost always on the edge of their concern?"