

2016 Bettison & James Oration
Greg Mackie
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Adelaide Festival of Ideas
**Thinking Adelaide: a Passion for Connecting
and Collecting**

It is great to have this opportunity to share with friends, colleagues, and most importantly, an AFol audience, a few things that have been on my mind.

I would like, of course, to observe an important cultural protocol, as has been observed throughout the Adelaide Festival of Ideas, and acknowledge the Kaurna people as the traditional owners of this country.

I am also proud to acknowledge the late Jim Bettison & Helen James for always backing the AFol from its inception.

Thanks to Simone Vinall and Simone's fellow Foundation Trustees: Doreen Mellor & Geoff Purdie and acknowledge Perpetual Trustees and Amanda Duthie from Adelaide Film Festival Corporation, who administers the Jim Bettison and Helen James Foundation Award.

I knew Helen and Jim and valued their support for some of the causes about which we shared a passion: in essence the arts and ideas; the value of learning and of the power of human potential to both imagine and then to realise change in our lives.

And so it was especially humbling for me when I was invited to be the inaugural recipient of the Award established by the Foundation that bears their name.

It is also a particular thrill to know that I now find myself in the company of two amazing fellow recipients of this award: Meryl Tankard and Tim Jarvis.

Each of us are incredibly different to the other in terms of our chosen paths - and I think this speaks so positively of the ambit of this new Award.

I have headlined this address 'Thinking Adelaide' - and I did so for a deliberate reason.

On Friday evening my esteemed amigo, Phillip Adams, delivered the 2016 AFol Oration about magicians, politics and various forms of huff and puffery.

Yesterday, our other AFol National Living Treasure - the other truly great 'elder' of ideas in this 2016 AFol - Barry Owen Jones, talked about the need for new political forces in Australia. Both of their chosen themes and topics resonated powerfully with me - and I imagine with many of you here this morning.

In a sense, what has driven my various efforts in culture here in Adelaide over 30 years, has been a deep desire to embed within our public culture, the valuing of ideas and of thinking, as an active and dynamic part of a journey to more equitable and sustainable society.

And it has been driven and inspired by my experience as a teenager during the Dunstan era: a South Australia that valued intelligence and egalitarianism, that valued and invested in the arts and culture, and that believed in the early 19th century founding principles of the Province of South Australia - of a paradise of dissent, where diversity was a strength and where, to be truly frank, as a young man coming to terms with my own sexuality, where I would not be thrown into jail - for being gay.

So you might well be wondering 'what does this have to do with anything..'?

Back in 2010-11, while Deputy CE, in the Premier's Department, I had convinced then Premier and Minister for the Arts, Mike Rann, to let me set up for South Australia a digital portal under the name "Thinking Adelaide".

On behalf of the SA Government - we trademarked the name and secured the web domains of all variants on the name - www.thinkingadelaide.com.au - .net - .org etc etc. And to protect the IP of the concept, we registered similar domains for every other Australian Capital City and for all the major cities of the English-speaking world.

My concept at that time was simple, a single web-based point of entry for any citizen or potential visitor to Adelaide with an interest in the life of the mind - to provide easy link-through and access to events and organisations that were about promoting ideas and thinking.

At the time - we were in what I still regard as something of a golden age - we had: AFol - Adelaide Thinkers in Residence, TACSI - The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, the Don Dunstan Foundation, the Hawke Centre, the Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding, RIAus, the Australian Science Media Centre, the Integrated Design Commission SA, Adelaide Writers' Week, and a burgeoning number of think tanks attached to our three academies.

And I want at this stage to acknowledge that the AFol had its origins under the last Liberal Government in South Australia, It was to the then Minister for the Arts, the Hon, Diana Laidlaw, with whom I had my first conversation about resourcing a festival of ideas.

But I digress. Back to 2010-11 it felt that we were approaching a new renaissance. Little was I to know at that time - that Mike Rann's days were numbered.

You see, back in 2011-12, DPC, as the ideas crucible for climate change policy, renewable energy and for thought leadership, was being dismantled, and it was being reinvented by its new CEO as a services centre for the SA Public Sector.

Mike Rann was moved on, and within 6 months so did I - off to head up ageing for John Hill.

Rightly or wrongly, it felt to me as though thinking and ideas were no longer valued - and that the past was no longer something upon which to build new legacies - instead things were to be abandoned.

So here I am, five years later, having left the SA Pubic Sector in 2013, and, thanks to the Inaugural Bettison James Award in 2015, I was afforded some grace and 'doing' time in which to focus on rescuing the AFol from oblivion. And so, along with a great bunch of AFol true believers who now comprise our board, I reclaimed the event brand and IP from government neglect, and to establish an independent not-for-profit incorporated association. The Award meant that I had the chance do some of the leg-work, to reactivate old partnerships and to forge some new ones.

I want to talk briefly about my idea, to develop 'Thinking Adelaide' as an 'AFol Global Alumni' - to connect past, present and future guests of AFol, and others, into a loose network of advocates and honorary ambassadors for both AFol and for the idea of Adelaide as a place where ideas and ideals are highly valued in civil society.

You see, at that time, none of our three public universities had invested seriously in activating their alumni associations other than for money seeking. The valuing of these diaspora relationships of knowledge and know-how have been left largely untended.

Thinking Adelaide has withered, and with that, I believe an incredibly powerful set of connections has not been able to make its contribution to the greater good.

And so, by way of scene setting for this idea, a couple of observations about mythology, about space, time, and relativity - and by this I don't mean physics.

In every society, in every community, and in every village around the world there are stories that people tell themselves, and that are told about us by others. Stories about identity and what it is that makes us distinctive, or maybe even special.

I preface my next comment by reaffirming my deep passion for Adelaide and South Australia. One of the things that we tell ourselves is that Adelaide and South Australia is a great place to collaborate. After all, it is seemingly easy to get 'the right people' around a table at reasonable short notice.

And we tell ourselves that this means we do collaboration better. WRONG! TOTALLY WRONG! The urbanist and former Adelaide Thinker in Residence, creative cities expert Charles Landry concluded of Adelaide, that we fall victim to confusing *conversation* with *collaboration*.

Adelaide is very much a public sector town and, as such we have turned 'meetings' into a pathology and I posit that the reason for this is that we place too little value on that most precious and scarce of resources - TIME. Like frogs in a pot of water warming slowly on the bench top - we squander time like it has no value.

We make meetings with no clear sense of purpose. We invite more people than we need with no regard to the authorising environments and hierarchies needed to make collaboration happen, and we squander valuable time that might otherwise be put to more productive use. Or that might, dare I say it, otherwise save the taxpayer hard-earned money.

So having said that, I contend that we need to move some of that productive time investment into cultivating and renewing relationships with the people who come to our place and who share with us their intellectual property.

My thinking is twofold:

First - we should better leverage these past and the present relationships - for future benefit - by connecting and collecting people. For 16 years, government half-funded the AFoI as a biennial event. That is, a half of a half equals a quarter. Only one quarter of the opportunity realised.

As was the case for decades with our Adelaide Festival of Arts, adelaide Fringe Festival and WOMADelaide, once every two years we cranked up the engine and put on a festival of ideas.

That is no way to cultivate meaningful change. That is no way to build a brand - or an audience - or a sponsorship base. That is no way to do anything other than to be entertained.

When Mike Rann hired me to run the arts portfolio, he gave me a simple KPI, make the arts more relevant to more people - more of the time.

I recommended that we create a new season of events and activities in spring around the Adelaide Film Festival, which also needs to be made annual, and so in 2011, I moved the AFoI from wintery July - to October.

If we are serious about winning friends and converting them into enthusiastic and influential champions for Adelaide and South Australia - we need to invest in that most human of transactions - two-way relationships for longevity.

We need to value these people, and to nurture the friendships.

This is made hard by that phenomenon called by some people 'public sector mobility' and by others, the politicisation of the senior echelons of the public sector. It is hard to hold course a journey when programs are at the mercy of political pleasure and not subjected to the kind of rigour that comes from evidence based evaluation.

And so in 16 years there have been around 160 guests of the AFoI, and of these, some 90% have been people who live elsewhere. We should be cultivating those relationships with more purpose than a photo opportunity for the scrap book.

There is an amazing organisation called ADVANCE - AUSTRALIANS ABROAD. It was established by the Howard Government and it activates ex-patriot Australian networks around the world. It is run from New York City by a great woman, Serafina Maiorano, a former Adelaide-based arts worker and administrator. Other state governments invest in a relationship with this incredible network, but not South Australia. Because it falls in the cracks between fiefdoms, we simply do not have a strategic focus on the potential value of these relationships.

What I am proposing is to adopt a mantra in South Australia of better cultivating and sustaining the relationships with thought leaders that we bring into our local 'communion', and that we 'convert' these people into champions and advocates for our shared mission to position Adelaide and South Australia as a place that is progressive, smart and prosperous.

We must not be fooled by spin and the falsehood that '*connectivity*' equals '*connectedness*' or that '*conversation*' equals '*collaboration*'.

The second of my ideas is informed by the opportunity that my new day job affords a sharper focus, the notion that by better *connecting* people with *collections*, we develop for Adelaide a special identity for the promotion of a culture of, and for, collecting

As a culture broker I know what I am not. I am not an historian, but I have an opportunity to bring new energy and focus to the mission and value of history. And so I want to speak to the idea of developing a strategy for Adelaide as a city of collections.

After an extended period doing consultancy work, employment struck in January 2016, when I commenced a short stint as Interim Director of Botanic Gardens SA. A brilliant collecting institution that, not unlike the SA Museum, is also a place of science and research.

And in late April I commenced as CEO with the History Trust of South Australia. Our organisation is the keeper, on behalf of the people of South Australia, of the State History Collection. We present an annual History Festival, provide modest support to regional museums, and we operate three museums - Migration, Motor and Maritime.

While there will always be larger museums and bigger collections elsewhere in Australia and the world, I want to propose development of a 20 year strategy to expand our collections footprint, both public *and* private.

We should look at ways to achieve better exposure for our state collections. A city of Collections and Collecting.

And this is not just a play for more taxpayer dollars to be invested in museums, although having said that, Adelaide is the only state capital city without a museum that tells our state's story.

More than permanent museums, it is to the human predilection for 'collecting' that I believe we must first turn our focus.

The collecting impulse is as deeply ingrained in our cultural DNA as are food - 'shopping and fucking'. The impulse to acquisition is deeply embedded, and it is the 'estate' upon which cultural heritage is built.

For me personally, be it the impulse to now collect digital images, or the habits of my youth: from stamps to coins to records to compact discs to books and, these days, to art, collecting is something that most people understand.

The passions that become obsessions, that add meaning and purpose to our lives - this impulse deserves to be both better studied - and understood.

If Adelaide were to put its collective minds to the task, a City of Collections and Collecting could eventually become as significant a strap line for Adelaide as does the 'festivals city' tag that took decades to earn.

Philanthropy and gifting has built the state history collection - it has built the Art Gallery of South Australia's collection. We have the world's best and largest collection of ATSI artefacts, established the world's first museum of migration, and our boutique size and temperament lends itself to such a mantle. Even if it is not true now, the ambit is plausible.

It is for this reason that I enthusiastically embrace and support the vision of the Art Gallery of SA to establish Adelaide Contemporary - a major contemporary art gallery that is also home to the entire art collection currently inaccessible in a dark warehouse.

By fostering and promoting the practice of private collecting, we ultimately create the pipeline for building the state's collections - our 'Common Wealth'.

Who knows what riches reside in the homes of private citizens. From first edition books to the visual arts and all manner of material culture, we collect ourselves into existence and beyond, toward immortality.

Of course, for many people collecting is a personal and deeply private thing. And that must always be respected. But surely, with the right enablement, our many privately held collections might be temporarily revealed.

The Roche House gallery in North Adelaide is reputed to be the biggest House Collection in the Southern Hemisphere.

And then there are the existing state collections that are incredible - but that remain in storage because of a lack of appropriate places in which to display them.

Between our four state collecting institutions, we hold vast treasures that await public sharing. And there are all manner of possible ways to display them - if only we had a place with sufficient temporary exhibition spaces in which to reveal them.

Perhaps the old Royal Adelaide Hospital site will present opportunity? Perhaps there are plans and concepts that are already at concept stage? Perhaps we need a 20 year plan to get our collections act together - build it and they will come.

Perhaps this kind of investment is a more sustainable, less environmentally risky - and far less costly way to forge a future for our state than large cement bunkers full of plutonium...?

Whatever the future holds, we already hold our future. It is called our past - and it deserves to be shared.

By way of conclusion, it is through better connecting and through better understanding the impulse for collecting that Adelaide and South Australia has an opportunity to pitch above its weight.