

# Collectables are safe, but it may not save Garrett

Peter Garrett should have been a happy man on Friday.

The visual arts sector had been relentless in its campaign against Jeremy Cooper's proposals that self-managed superannuation funds be forced to divest themselves of art and other collectables within five years.

Like the broader arts sector, visual arts might be small in dollar terms but it's sexy enough to get media traction when it wants it, and it got plenty over this issue.

The Arts Minister put the sector's case to his colleagues, and he got a win on Friday when Labor announced it would reject this aspect of Cooper's review should it get back into power.

The impending election probably drove the decision, the government's first response to Cooper. It gets a high-profile sector off Labor's back at a time when it needs to shut down bad news stories. It is also notable that it costs Labor nothing, in dollar terms and because it's such a minor part of Cooper's report.

The Liberals and Greens had already taken that stance, and opposition spokesman on arts Steve Ciobo crowed on Friday that he "welcomed the Labor Party adopting the Coalition's position on this". He added that "it's really indicative of how slowly the minister works that it has taken him this length of time to get to this point".

Regardless, a win is a win, and it will be interesting to see whether this raises Garrett's stakes within the arts community. The former Midnight Oil frontman received a rock star welcome when he took over as Arts Minister in 2007,



Arts Minister Peter Garrett claims his first term has been a series of wins, but he has left a lot undone. Photo: DALLAS KILPONEN

which was apt because he was, well, a rock star. Nearly three years later the gloss has worn off and you don't have to go far to hear arts executives complaining — usually off the record, given their reliance on the government drip — about how disappointing Garrett has been.

Garrett says he doesn't get any sense of dissatisfaction "at all", and that he's delivered much of what he promised in the 2007 election. Resale royalty on secondary art sales? Tick. More money for

indigenous art centres? Tick. ArtStart funding for graduates? Tick. He's also got arts onto the national education curriculum, overseen the arrival of the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, and put new money into a raft of programs skewed towards training and artistic development.

The shift in sentiment towards him underlines the lack of homogeneity in the arts — what pleases one segment displeases another — and that the sector is

rarely uniformly happy with what its political leaders serve up.

That said, Garrett has failed to deliver not only big new licks of money — partly understandable given the economic climate — but robust, exciting new policies that could be sold to cabinet. Drafting a new blueprint for the orchestras and committing to the Sydney Opera House's opera theatre development are just two areas where leadership could have really paid off.

The arts also wanted a champion,

and Garrett failed to be this during the Bill Henson debate.

Garrett's biggest achievement, the resale royalty, was first proposed by Rupert Myer back in 2002, and it remains contentious, both in principle and due to teething issues.

Nevertheless, he says it's the thing he's most proud of, and that he's confident any initial issues can be sorted out. "I don't think ... it will require significant amendment at all," he says. "It's just a case of working through those small issues with those involved in the sector."

The resale royalty — a 5 per cent royalty paid by collectors to the artist on every sale after the second secondary sale, after June 9 — is coming in very slowly, and will thus affect the art market very gradually.

This delay is a good thing, but it is not certain the royalty will help indigenous artists, who were foremost in Garrett's mind when he introduced it, particularly if it forces galleries to pay only when a work sells rather than up front, and comes as the market is contracting.

Some of his other achievements have not been without problems, either. The PM's Literary Awards delivered new money but the argument that it would have been better to invest in the existing Miles Franklin Award has merit.

A review into independent film and television production is under way, but it won't be finished until after the election, delaying any outcome until at least 2011.

Garrett says he would like to remain Arts Minister if the government is re-elected. If he gets his wish, it will be an opportunity for some bold new policy development. He will need to take it.