

'Window dresser' Garrett a pain in the arts ...

[A Sydney arts insider writes:](#)

FEDERAL ELECTION 2010, PETER GARRETT, THE ARTS

Invitations have gone out to close allies of Peter Garrett for a function in Randwick this Sunday to help him "mark the achievements of the last three years and to share our vision for the future of the arts in Australia".

"Raise a glass for the arts", it says, but it'd be interesting to see who attends because as the election looms, it's not just the environmental lobby crossing its fingers hoping for a new minister. The arts industry is praying that the portfolio is handed to a more competent and active minister.

It's no surprise that the former Nuclear Disarmament Party candidate has had a tough time of it within Labor ranks. But no one could have expected his performance was going to be this bad and many are surprised he's still running.

For someone who was once a working artist, on the whole he's been missing from every aspect of what is an enormous portfolio.

He was silent during the Bill Henson debate and his inaction to fight for dollars during the roll out of the Rudd government's \$70 billion stimulus package is largely seen by the industry as one of the biggest missed opportunities for the sector.

Hundreds of heritage sites, old regional theatres and arts spaces across the country are desperate for restoration work. Not only would it have made economic sense to pump money into these projects, with many of them in marginal seats, it would have made political sense.

Despite traditional affiliations with the ALP, the arts industry is developing a fond nostalgia for Liberal Party predecessors in the portfolio -- George Brandis and Rod Kemp -- who were able to fight for extra dollars and boost spending.

Ten years ago Garrett was the headline act at the opening of the Sydney Olympics leading the charge for an apology to the stolen generation. Now he's the weakest link in the federal caucus and a pin-up boy for Liberal Party advertising as the minister in charge of the insulation debacle.

On environmental issues, Garrett has probably spent most of his time in parliament biting his lip on issues close to his heart, but on the arts front he is all but dismissive of an industry that, according to research presented by Queensland University of Technology at the 2020 summit supports just over 400,000 jobs nationwide. (That's more than the mining industry).

Garrett's three years at the helm have shown the conviction of man who is distrustful of what he terms "the heritage arts" (major arts companies in theatre, dance and opera). One manager of a key national arts company said that under Garrett the arts have become a "dumb-downed rockabilly version" of an industry that once sought excellence.

Admittedly, Garrett launched a website inviting submissions on a "[national cultural policy](#)" and sought to redress some of the funding inequalities between metropolitan and indigenous communities. But three years is a long time in politics and window dressing and creating a website can only really get you so far.

As a high-profile candidate who was parachuted into the safe seat of Kingsford Smith, Garrett's limitations as a minister have wider repercussions than those of most members of parliament.

Like a sore thumb on the front bench, Garrett will be lucky to survive a reshuffle if a Gillard government is re-elected. The only thing that may keep him in cabinet is the fact he was parachuted in by Gillard's old ally, Mark Latham.

But things must be pretty bad when Mark Latham is the only feather in your cap.

Send your tips to boss@crikey.com.au or submit them anonymously [here](#).