

Terror Australis: the real cultural attack

BY KAREN NOACK

BARRY HUMPHRIES went to visit the woman who had supposedly stolen his – or rather Sir Les Patterson's – job as Australian cultural attache in the first week he took up her new post at Australia House in London.

The satirist's meeting with Rebecca Hossack late last year was brief but amicable, as the bemused Australian High Commissioner, Neal Blewett, discovered on his way to an exhibition with his new staff member.

"It was quite funny because the High Commissioner was expecting to meet the cultural attache in the foyer and he came down and there were the two of us," Ms Hossack recalls.

Since then, Humphries has sent Christmas greetings – postcards from "your unworthy predecessor", and a photo signed "All the best Becky, love Sir Les" – even though she has been appointed to dismantle all Sir Les's years of hard work as a roving cultural attache for this country.

The High Commission launched its search for a cultural development officer in the middle of last year, a move which prompted the British press to scoff at Australian pretensions to culture and which had one cartoonist depicting Crocodile Dundee, Sir Les and Dame Edna Everage lining up outside "Keating House" for the job.

Ms Hossack's new position does not yet have an official title, although cultural attache seems to sum up fairly well the task of stamping out Australia's image in England as a cultural backwater by promoting the scope and depth of our cultural achievements.

"It's going to be tough, I'm not under any illusions," she acknowledges, but says the task would be even tougher without being able to use the stereotypes which Barry Humphries has created, such as Sir Les and Dame Edna.

After all, getting the British press and media to take notice is only part of the battle. Being taken seriously is another hurdle again. A recent segment on Radio

Four began with some file tape of Humphries, and then an interview with Ms Hossack attempting to debunk the old myth that Australians couldn't give a XXXX about culture.

"Without him, I wouldn't get to first base, because who wants to hear somebody just go on about facts and figures," she said. "A lot of what I'm doing is pegged on the fact that he has created this stereotype which I can now knock down."

HOWEVER, armed with facts and figures, Ms Hossack aims to sell to the British press and public the wonders of the Federal Government's *Creative Nation* cultural policy, launched by the Prime Minister, Mr Keating, last October.

This financial year that includes Federal Government funding for a range of cultural activities, including \$117 million to the Australian Cultural Development Office.

"We have \$252 million being spent on the arts, which is 50 per

cent more per head than the British Government gives annually to the arts," she points out.

Her own background does not fit the stereotype of the young Australians who venture to London in their early 20s to work in pubs.

After graduating in law and the history of art, Ms Hossack came to England from Melbourne in 1980 to study for the Bar.

Unable to pursue both her interests, she went into the art world, completing a diploma in art history at auctioneers Christies before going on to the Guggenheim in Venice on a scholarship.

Later she returned to London for a two-year stint in a Dickensian-style antiquarian bookshop, cataloguing art books.

She mounted *The Last Wapping Show* in 1984, a huge exhibition undertaken before developers forced artists from warehouses in London's Docklands area, and which won her a Business Sponsorship of the Arts award from the British Government.

In 1988, Ms Hossack opened



Rebecca Hossack . . . "He has created this stereotype which I can now knock down."

he tackles Sir Les

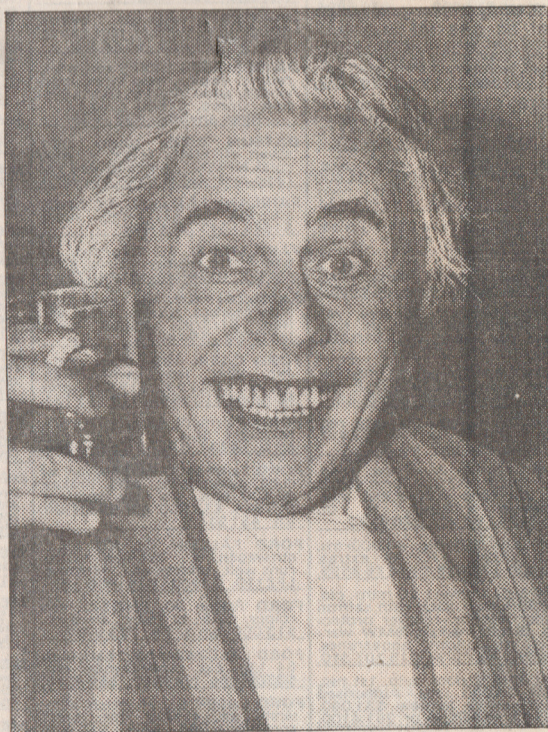
her own gallery in smart Windmill Street in London's West End, followed by another in 1991 in even smarter St James.

While the St James gallery will be closed now she has an extremely full-time position at Australia House, the other one will remain open in the hands of capable managers.

Meanwhile, much of Ms Hosack's strategy for the promotion of Australian culture is still under wraps. But there will be literary soirees, work with the Australian Tourist Commission on marketing 1995 as the Year of Australian Art and Culture, and projects to emphasise our multiculturalism.

And since a great deal of the British media image of Australia remains fixed on kangaroos and cricket, one aim is simply to change a recent situation whereby a *Sunday Telegraph* journalist found nothing in the files when tapping in the keywords "Keating" and "culture" in a computer search.

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Sir Les Patterson ... sent postcards from "your unworthy predecessor", and a signed photo.