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A cultural revolution at Australia House

WHEN Rebecca Hossack landed the newly created job in London of selling Australian culture to the world, she received a brief note from a friend. It read, "With warmest wishes from your unworthy predecessor", and was signed Sir Les Patterson.

Hossack may be the first real-life cultural attache in Australia House on the Strand, but a foul-mouthed, spittle-strewn Les Patterson she certainly is not. In fact, it's hard to find a pigeon-hole for this vibrant 38-year-old Australian former lawyer.

The note from the famous alter ego of her mate Barry Humphries came amid quiet approval in sections of London's glitterati that Australian officials, under the leadership of the High Commissioner to Britain, former Hawke Government Health Minister and art connoisseur Neal Blewett, had made a particularly astute choice.

Hossack's arrival at Australia House at the end of last year was perfectly timed. A new mood had begun to sweep Anglo-Australian affairs in a host of areas, and she sensed at once something of a renaissance in cultural ties between the two countries despite Paul Keating's republican push. Seven months down the track Hossack is at the heart of the revolution.

After 15 years in the London art world, there's little about it she doesn't know. Tall, lithe and energetic, she is bustling with enthusiasm for her work, the great passion for which she deserted the law in 1980.

DAVID O'REILLY says Australia's cultural attache in London is implementing a three-year plan to bring Australian arts to Britain and then to Europe.

Armed with a degree in fine arts as well as one in law, her plan on arrival in London was to study for the Bar and spend her leisure time in the great galleries, like the Tate.

"Within a week I realised I was just going to be locked up in a horrid little room studying endlessly," she says. "I'd already spent seven years studying and I suddenly thought I can't do this any more, it isn't where my heart lies." So she took jobs in the visual-arts world and eventually opened her own gallery near Soho, down the road from the British Museum.

The irony is that while her love of the arts led her to settle in London, far from home, years of immersion in that world brought a dawning realisation about the quality of Australian culture. In the mid-1980s she sensed the beginnings of a seminal shift in British attitudes to it.

She began to feature Australian artists in her gallery, and from 1988 pioneered the exhibition of Aboriginal works of art in Europe. Then, when a friend sent her a newspaper clipping advertising the job with Blewett, she instantly saw a powerful new platform.

To talk to her is to ride a roller-coaster of information about who's doing what where and how Australian painters, sculptors, dancers, singers,

are fitting in. Ideas tumble forward, one after another, about how an Australian performer or theatrical company could be promoted.

With Blewett's support, Hossack is now embarked on a three-year plan to bring the best of Australia's cultural life to Britain and then to Europe. She is scathing about the way even some of Australia's top-line theatrical companies have missed enormous opportunities in Europe for years because they have never really learned how the arts-establishment "system" operates.

She sees her presence as an important new information resource for Australian artists and companies. But she is also hard at work trying to "educate" London critics about Australians. Her plan, which Blewett enthusiastically embraced, has as its first phase a revolution in the use of the elegant 80-year-old Australia House building in Aldwych, near where the Strand meets Fleet Street.

With the stimulus provided by the Keating Government's October 1994 *Creative Nation* blueprint for promotion of the arts, Australia House is being refurbished, with a big section transformed into a permanent gallery of Australian art.

The first exhibition — works by the