

# National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As an artist

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filmmaker, writer and former CEO of Film Australia Ltd.

*A place for every story: reflecting the diversity of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.*

Forty years experience in the screen sector, including direct involvement in policy formation, has led me to the view that Australia's diversity is not well represented on our screens. There are many examples of under representation, but particularly concerning are the absence of regional perspectives, and the lack of opportunities for regional Australians to participate in screen work. Our national screen policies focus on "commercial sustainability" and "industry" at the expense of inclusivity and cultural breadth.

Prior to 2008, the Australian Film Commission had an explicit developmental role, and was responsible for developing ideas, talent and screen culture throughout the country. Film Australia (the Commonwealth's production company) proactively commissioned production in most states, under its National Interest Program contract. It was left to the Film Finance Corporation to invest in "commercial" projects (though it should be said that most Australian productions are so subsidized via various mechanisms that few, even now, can honestly be described as commercial). This meant that at least some Commonwealth screen resources were made available to develop screen culture, skills and work outside the major industry hubs of Sydney, Melbourne and the Gold Coast.

Now, despite the existence of various offsets designed to support industrial scale production, Screen Australia, the sole remaining Federal agency providing direct subsidy to the sector, largely supports business enterprises and market-oriented projects.

In other words, in interpreting its act, Screen Australia has tended to deliver most support to promoting "the development of commercially focused screen production businesses" and their projects, at the expense of aspects of its mission that might broadly be described as cultural and developmental in intent.

It is not realistic to expect that every state and city and town will have infrastructure needed for industrial scale production. Yet current Screen Australia policies fail to recognise alternative modes of screen production that predominate in smaller Australian places, where, thanks to more accessible technologies, sophisticated screen production is increasingly possible. Funding however is rarely available to artisanal, individual producers, or to cottage-industry style companies, many with capacity to make innovative and lower cost work, sometimes designed more for local audiences than for commercial and international end users requiring all the stars, studios and effects that big money can buy.

In Tasmania, for example, Federal government support for screen production related activities is shamefully and inequitably miniscule. This situation arises from policies skewed toward supporting screen production on an industrial scale, rather than as a cultural activity. And, especially since the creation of Screen Australia, from a dearth of Commonwealth initiatives aimed at growing screen culture in places where the screen sector remains under-developed.

For complex historical and geographic reasons, Tasmania has never developed a business infrastructure that could realistically be called a screen industry. Both Federal and state governments now prioritise commercial production which is usually inbound

(i.e generated outside Tasmania). The state has no significantly sized production companies, little screen training, no ABC TV production capacity other than news, and one imperiled screen resource organization, Wide Angle Tasmania, which has survived on soon-to-expire philanthropic funding since the withdrawal of federal (and consequently state) funding for such organizations in 2015. There has been never been a Tasmanian member of Screen Australia's board. There are very few opportunities for Tasmanians to learn or practise screen arts. The result of this situation is that Tasmanians wishing to embark on screen industry careers must leave the state, and those who remain are denied opportunities to express or see themselves and their concerns on our screens.

Federal screen funds to develop skills, projects and local screen cultures should be available to regional Australians as a matter of equity and also to develop capacities for digital story-telling which will have longer term consequences in terms of culture, literacy and, potentially, employment.

Most importantly, if diversity is to be genuinely supported via our national cultural policy, if there is to be a place for every story and indeed a story from every place, a new approach is needed.

**I would strongly recommend the creation of a new federal agency with a remit to develop the diversity of our screen culture. Shrinking three Commonwealth film agencies into one has not worked to support local cultures and skills and regional stories that have value for audiences around Australia because they “illustrate or interpret aspects of Australian life, or matters of interest to the Australian people.”**

*Strong institutions: providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts and culture.*

As a documentary filmmaker and writer I have cause to be grateful to the work of our collecting institutions, in particular the National Library, National Archives and the National Film and Sound Archive. Their work in collecting, preserving and making records accessible, underpins interpretations and reimaginations of our history across artforms.

For many years now, efficiency dividends and targets have incrementally reduced the collecting institutions' capacity. Added to which, responsibilities and expectations have increased in the digital age, but have not been matched by funding increases. Even when Film Australia's Library (which contained significant Commonwealth owned film materials produced over a century) was handed to the National Film and Sound Archive in the wake of Screen Australia's creation, there was an inadequate allocation of funds to enable the NFSA to actively manage and make accessible an important collection.

**Efficiency dividends and targets should be immediately halted and a review of the collecting institutions' capacity to fulfil their missions and objectives should urgently be undertaken, with a view to ensuring they are adequately funded to do the work of collecting, preserving and making available the records of Australian life that make much creative practice possible and relevant. The boards of these organisations should also be reviewed to ensure they have the historical, cultural and artistic expertise necessary to guide our collecting institutions into the future.**

Another kind of institution in the arts and culture landscape is the small not for profit organisation which has evolved in response to community needs. Wide Angle Tasmania

is one such organisation, established in 2005 to develop local screen culture and skills and modestly funded by both Commonwealth and state governments until 2015, when Screen Australia withdrew from funding such organisations around the country. A poorly resourced state agency declined to pick up the slack. Unlike its mainland counterparts, the organisation has survived thanks to the generosity of philanthropists who contributed significant monies to ensure the organisation's survival for another 6 years. That funding will soon cease and there is now no government agency to which Wide Angle can appeal. Should it be forced to close, Tasmanians will lose a rare piece of screen infrastructure in the state.

**Revised funding arrangements should recognise the cultural sector as a complex ecosystem, requiring support for small and medium sized institutions that deliver value in more targeted ways than our major organisations.**

*Reaching the audience: ensuring our stories reach the right people at home and abroad.*

Australian screen stories are disadvantaged in a domestic marketplace flooded with "dumped" English language audiovisual material. Without strong regulatory measures to ensure Australian content on our screens, commercial television and streaming services will always prefer cheaper imports.

**The reinstatement and extension of Australian content requirements for drama, children's and documentary programming are essential if Australian audiences are to have access to material which reflects, interprets and reimagines their own experience and concerns. New local content requirements should be imposed on streaming services operating in Australia, as is the practice in Europe and Canada.**