

# National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As an individual

**What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:**

## **First Nations**

It is overdue that First Nations initiatives are a first order priority to a national cultural policy. Support needs to be increased in the encouragement and support awarded to First Nations work, in the spirit of the first inclusion by Gough Whitlam from the time of his creation of the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973 under the chair of Dick Roughsey with, for the first time in Australian history, fifteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait members. That board had full responsibility vested in its members for decision making as to policy formulation, priorities and project funding, exclusively under their sole aegis. We have gone backwards since then in support volume, value and vested decision making rights – it needs dramatic redirection aimed to redress years of neglect and often extreme, intrinsically negatively directed and decidedly poor policy.

If there is not a firm First Nations foundation stone to a reset in national cultural policy, then we will all be failing the opportunity the cultural review affords us.

## **A Place for Every Story**

The story of Australia and Australians reposes in the Commonwealth government's duty of care to ensure :-

1. a vital adequately supported performing arts landscape,
2. Investment in diverse primary creators and diverse creative work
3. well supported and appropriately directed and governed social memory institutions, museums and galleries with refreshed relevance and outreach
4. appropriate regulatory and harmonised investment to support a rich screen production industry for work devoted to original narratives, documentary and dedicated children's material (the settings in this arena are woefully outmoded and have not been seriously revised from a policy perspective since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century)
5. policies which embrace the three tiers of government and offer incentives for community contributions and private philanthropy. Presently policies are haphazard, uncoordinated, and lacking coherent unity of purpose.
6. Deliberate intervention to ensure a place for artists in all major civic occasions as a fundamental aspect of civic cultural awareness – whether by way of poetry reading, music or other performance and regular commissioning of public artworks, proper statuary (which redresses the chronic racial and gender imbalances from the past), placing creative work at the heart of civic affairs.

7. Central to a redirection in policy is to ensure amendment to the curriculum framework for school education, so that it restores a place for the creative work of Australians as central to sensibly constructed program to understand our own cultural achievements and the role of living artists in our society – the current settings are presently deficient in emphasis and content.

### **The Centrality of the Artist**

Australia has steadily eroded the support to individual artists most severely especially in:

- respect for the rights of artists as workers in the nation, when they are treated contemptuously in most policy actions of government,
- ensuring their participation as key decision makers as to policy priorities and support (when compared with the 1970s today's arrangements are hostage to a mindless managerialism which has no relationship to the empowerment of individual artists in the 70's and 80's as to having close involvement as primary participants in all key policy and project decision making). Restoration of artists to the 'governance table' is axiomatic to healthy reform as is the necessity of ensuring that the majority of board appointments are made with the need for informed authority and expertise in appointees, rather than the sinecures that have populated to many board appointments in the last 9 years particularly (and where many demonstrably poor appointments have been made, serially).
- investing in the reliable creation of new work. The collapse in creative fellowships for writers, composers, visual artists, and first nations creators and other arenas of primary creation has disempowered creativity in Australia hideously and must be addressed. For example in 1974/75 there were in literature alone: 75 novelist fellowships, 10 short story writer fellowships, 26 playwriting fellowships, 46 for poets and 26 for non-fiction and on it went, as compared with less than 10 for all the creative disciplines today. It is deeply shocking and has changed the social and cultural settings for creative life, work and confidence profoundly. There is chronic underinvestment (to be polite) in original artistic work and artists themselves. It is profoundly unhealthy and must be cured as a first order priority.
- protecting artists work with adequate copyright legislation and enforcement and renovating glaring omissions in current legal frameworks on which there has been much comment and little curative action
- revisiting the levels of support under the Public Lending Right, Artbank and other similar schemes which have been financially neglected for years.

The creative community at large responded with commendable resilience, originality, and with a range of initiatives in delivering a profusion of wonderfully creative responses to Covid19. Those responses were (and continue to be) in evidence in dozens of daily delivery capsules with a wealth of essentially digitally delivered products – performances, exhibitions, webinars, thought pieces, and surveys looking to sustain audience connection, community bonding and to offer affirmative responses in the face of often dire circumstances.

At the same time, in too many instances the mainstream performing arts and many institutions were isolated from effective assistance (with some exceptions for interventions from the States and limited contributions from the Commonwealth). The reality was that the arts did not receive the support widely evident elsewhere in the economy. It was commonly acknowledged in broad

commentary, that the arts and entertainment industries (together with the tourism sector) were more severely impacted than any other sectors in the economy, compounding the impact of over a decade of severe declines in government investment.

The arts and entertainment sector were treated in a generally unsympathetic and quite unusually neglectful way, with the majority of practitioners being ineligible for Job Keeper, given the peripatetic nature of creative professionals. Such inflexibility from the Commonwealth provided firm evidence of an unsupportive approach to sustaining the creative community - particularly at a time of such prolonged disruption and profound financial challenge. The need for a national policy reset and recommitment has never been greater.

### **Strong Institutions**

Our institutions need to have necessary 'recovery investment' in support of the enduring need to acquire, celebrate and interrogate our own diverse creative products, cultures (and those from elsewhere) in order to improve the knowledge, appreciation and value of cultural products to the national mindset and aspirations of our people. Neglect of memory institutions has been so prolonged (at times extreme) in the majority of the last quarter century that there is a large distance to travel in securing an even adequate baseline.

If we care about and love our collections and the people who made the books, paintings, sculptures, maps, manuscripts, objects, stories, studies, science and tools that inform them, then we owe them the continuing honour of rethinking the challenge of community connection with confident renovated policy. That challenge must be accepted clearly, in a way which avoids being patronising and celebrates the journey itself. The journey inherent to the joy of all discovery, teaching and learning.

At its heart is the essential missing element of so much in the digital domain – a sense of refashioned citizenship, digital citizenship. It is a complex topic with many strands. At core I would suggest is the need to reinvest the value and need for the community's relationship with humanity's achievements and devotion to creativity and discovery through thoughtful balance between physical collection and conservation and digital liberation of collections in thoughtful and genuinely creative ways.

Part of the evident neglect in recent years derives from an absence of defined policy and clear national objectives as to investment purpose and priorities from the Commonwealth in the short, medium, and longer term for culture. Yes, inquiries have been announced (and they are welcome but only if they genuinely contribute to solution provision) but the financial devastation which has occurred in real declines exceeding 20% over the last decade and erosion of support to individual artists to unprecedentedly low levels, goes substantially unremarked in terms of deeds matching words from the last Commonwealth government announcement in late June of 2021. Nothing concrete in direct assistance delivery happened subsequently when the case for support was made abundantly clear. There is no way this can be avoided as to the context in which the cultural policy response deliberates and formulates a relevant response. The simple reality is that the Commonwealth has sustained an unusually extended period of significant underinvestment in the creative community in all its manifestations nationally.

### **Reaching the Audience**

Audience responsiveness, accountability and centrality to policy formulation and prioritisation lies at the heart of any effective cultural policy reset.

In securing a better sense of engagement with audience feedback and measures of audience reaction to produced work and the broad body of offerings in the cultural policy landscape it would

be desirable to see the problem turned on its head with a general challenge being issued as a core element in cultural policy that support is dependent on respondents convincingly demonstrating how they approach the myriad questions as to effective audience engagement.

I would suggest in essence, that the grand policy challenge today is the need to restore value in the community's relationship with humanity's creative and cultural achievements (and critically those of Australians) reinforcing the benefits from essential clear purpose in society and its institutions. A renewed sense of the underpinnings of Australian culture, reinforcing its enduring strengths, and addressing evident weaknesses, is central to any serious policy review.

It demands a renewal in the sense of responsibility in addressing the journey liberated to us all in using amazing new digital tools. A new toolkit is needed with different approaches to research, planning, teaching and decision making in resetting relevant cultural policy. A devotion to understanding history, creativity and discovery is I suggest, central to renewal and outlook for democracy and its approach to relevant cultural policy formulation, equally.

We see turbulence as never before, reflected in wholly different commercial and social operating models and in people's behavioural responses. Getting policy right is hard. The game has changed. Innovation is core to the present and provides the bedrock to future success.

Innovation is something we talk a lot about in Australia and we spend billions on research and development. However managed programs of innovation in Australia have an uneven history in effectiveness. It is often process obsessive, but outcome poor. Regrettably, it is a regular pattern of modern Australian experience, seen in outmoded policy settings, which fear risk taking and try to insulate programs from the possibility of failure, nobbling them in the process to mediocre ambitions and modest policy horizons.

Clearly legislative action and regulation is currently substantially disconnected from these forces. A logic reset for the digital era is required. This seems to me to represent the heartland of the reinvention challenge and provides one of the critical policy setting tasks. Increasingly direct intervention from governments to achieve change is going to be required. This has been seen very clearly throughout the Covid19 experience and the diverse response from governments here and internationally.

We are experiencing a fascinating, albeit compulsory, ride. One which will have increasing speed with the necessity of adoption of and adaptation to, the digital disruption settings at the core. When you stand back and think about it does anyone really think that existing regulatory models are appropriate or sustainable in such a rapid-fire world? Look at the inability of government to meaningfully respond to the disruptive force of social media or of many new hi-technology purveyors as but one of many checkpoints.

Fundamentally government has to effectively respond to two inexorable policy imperatives in setting cultural policy – it has to increase direct investment substantially (and there is no way around that – it cannot continue as it is today); and it has to create an environment which encourages and enables others to invest independently or in partnership with government mandated initiatives. Continuing innovation and fragmentation in markets, products and commercial settings are guaranteed from digital evolution – the ferocity of attack and the velocity of change will not abate. Merit, ingenuity, speed, flexibility, and performance increasingly rule the day. Australia is often losing in this process because of national policy weakness and devotion to outmoded methodologies. A pronounced allergy to matters of intellect and creativity in the policy landscape so evident in the last few years has also been unusually unhelpful, to say the least.

However, our competitive effectiveness will dissipate without refreshed intellectual and creative underpinnings in our policy objectives and regulatory tools. We are a small country at 'the bottom of the world' (notwithstanding the internet) with many parochial pillars, which are venomous to bold national ambition and achievement. However, a nation of 25 million, which speaks English, is either profoundly advantaged or potentially disabled as a result almost entirely of its public policy settings for culture and the ambition and outcomes they reflect. This provides a critically important context for policy determination in Australia, as we do not enjoy the natural cultural protections that non-English language societies have by virtue of the natural insulation their languages and related social development provides.

If Australia does not act to defend and promote Australian creative innovation and sustain a landscape for a resilient creative cultural fabric, the nation we will be condemned to become a client state of others – with an inevitable progressive talent drain allied with diminishing ambition and possibilities for success. We will be a poorer society, less able to partner in a period of unbridled energy, innovation and true transformation.

The purpose of policy is about ensuring the Australian community can once again renew its relationship and engagement with Australian creators and culture in refreshed meaningful ways of enduring value. Story telling in its many diverse guises is central to nation building in this confronting, volatile and complex world. The policy challenge is to ensure we secure settings which reposition from an agenda of fear about creativity and intellect and arm Australians to engage convincingly liberating their natural talents and capabilities.