

The Hon Tony Burke MP, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for the Arts

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Today is not about me having the answers. In fact, today is entirely about me not having the answers. The whole idea of today is to generate submissions and discussion so that later this year, we'd land with a cultural policy that works for Australia, that works for yourselves. But I just want to start with what cultural policy is, because while it's always being led by the Minister for the Arts, it's more than an arts policy.

Now, a cultural policy isn't simply a set of arts announcements; A cultural policy, if you get it right, is a whole of government process that speaks to every portfolio. It affects how you conduct your employment and workplace relations policies. It affects your education policy. It affects how you deliver health services for people. In a very big way, it affects your trade policy and how you engage in foreign affairs. A cultural policy, if you get it right, is about the status and role of the cultural sector within government and therefore within Australia. There's arts announcements that obviously have to go with it. But a cultural policy is much, much bigger than that.

I've gone back through the Creative Australia document that only had six months of life before it was set to one side, and the principles and the pillars are there to form a good foundation. If we start with that foundation... Look, sure, a four-year process, you'll always end up with something better, but if we just start with the foundation and work quickly, I'm confident we can land a cultural policy this year, this year. So, to do that, we need submissions in the next few weeks. We need to move this quickly. And if we get to an announcement, as I'm very hopeful we will at the end of the year, that's not the end point. What I want to happen at the end of the year is we change the trajectory. So, the test of cultural policy isn't where are we at in January or February. The test of it is where are we at in three years' time, where are we at in five years' time, what have we continued to build over 10 years. What I want to be able to do now is to say, "Okay, how do we rebuild together? How do we grow together? How do we make sure that your work affects how Australians know themselves, how we know each other, and how the world comes to know us."? That's the job. So, let's get started.

In the new cultural policy, though, there's one thing I want to change from the start, and that's the order. In any cultural policy in Australia, I think the first pillar is obvious: First Nations First. That's where we need to start. In starting with First Nations, we start with an area that's often not thought about as arts policy, but has always been part of cultural policy. And that's the significance of language. The loss of language can be the loss of culture and the challenges of culture and the significance of sustaining language, preserving language, and passing language on is a key role. Similarly, the preservation of songlines and art forms and dance and visual art that have been here since the first sunrise all play a critical role in First Nations.

But also, under this pillar, there are areas, some of which are not funding issues, but we absolutely need to act on. The prevalence of fake art is a real threat, not simply to income, and it's a real threat to income, but it's also a direct attack on cultural integrity of First Nations art. This argument has been going back and forth for about seven years without action being taken. In the cultural policy, I want to land it this year and I want us to take a very hard line against fake art being sold in Australia and being passed off as though it were First Nations' work.

As I say, anything that I put forward, it's to spark ideas. None of this is conclusions. And if your submission refers to this speech and says that I got it horribly wrong, good, good. We want that. We want the discussion. I've been Arts Minister before; I get part of the job is you get told you're horribly wrong. I'm onto it. And I want the sector to be fearless. I have no respect for arts ministers who try to muzzle the sector. So, don't take any of these ideas as being conclusions, but I want to draw out these sorts of themes, these sorts of ideas.

And finally, with respect to First Nations, I do want the policy to speak to what we do in our engagement overseas with the return of stolen material.

Pillar number two: A Place For Every Story. Now, one of the things I'm trying to do is to have a cultural policy that we can develop that is right, that doesn't invite the straight culture war. People get that when we talk about diversity, we're talking about every story. We're not about excluding anyone. But it's also true that there are some stories that have found it harder to be properly heard, to be properly respected. So, I want within A Place For Every Story for there to be an understanding as to what do we do to make sure that artistic expression and involvement is possible regardless of physical or intellectual ability or disability. What can we do to make sure that regardless of sex, of gender, of race, of ethnicity, of faith, regardless of all the different issues of age, of all the different issues that can sometimes close doors on people, how do we make sure that every story has its place within our cultural policy? Not simply for the validation of people seeing their own stories but also for the benefit of the rest of us to know each other's stories better.

With every story and there being a place for every story, I'm conscious that there will be stories that are commercially viable; there'll be stories that are commercial blockbusters. And there'll be stories that without funding will not be told and need to be told. And I want the test not to be whether or not something is the massive money spinner and therefore it's the one that gets all the ticks, that that's obviously something great when it happens. But the real test is the integrity of the story and the value to those who receive the story, and that's when I talk about a place for every story.

But the other thing is in that word "place". Now, I know this will be controversial in the room but I have a strong view that arts and culture exist and should be funded beyond Sydney and Melbourne. And I'm also conscious that arts and culture, even throughout the different capital cities around the country, don't only reside in the CBDs, they don't only reside in the regions, they reside in the suburbs as well. And too often we get into a conversation where it's CBD or region and the suburbs get forgotten. And I'm very conscious of making sure that we draw on all the different aspects of Australia and make sure that no matter where you live, no matter where you grow up, no matter what your postcode is, you've got access to hearing the stories and telling the stories of Australia.

Pillar three: The Artist. Now, when I talk about the artist here, don't just think about everybody who works within the sector. We've kept the title of 'The Artist', but it's everybody. I always put to one side the economic arguments. I did you a disservice by doing that, because it does need to be both. And I discovered it needed to be both two years ago when the lockdown period of the pandemic started. Straight after artists around Australia had been asked to work for free for Bushfire Relief and you made sure that you had the communities back, you suddenly discovered the community might not have your back. So, when I talk about The Artist, please know this time in terms of your submissions, we're talking about the artist as creator and the artist as worker. I want to be able to deal with both.

Now, the artist as worker is an area of policy where in many ways, at a Federal level, we're starting from way behind. But we have an opportunity this time. This is the first time, I think, certainly in Australia's history, I'm not sure how much it's happened around the world, where the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations is also the Minister for the Arts. So, while it's a whole of government process anyway, while it's a whole of government process anyway, there's a particular opportunity we have now and I want to make sure that we take it.

There are different issues that go to people's industrial rights, but there's another area where we have left, let the sector down really badly over the years. Not just the sector. Kate Jenkins, Respect@Work Report, made clear that in terms of women having safe workplaces around Australia, we had failed in most workplaces around the country in delivering the sorts of standards that should be able to be expected. But as different aspects of the #MeToo movement hit Australia, it was clear that we had failed to provide safe workplaces for arts and cultural workers in a really appalling way. And the people, who were often on the cutting edge of telling stories and exposing stories and letting audiences see how bad disrespect and violence can be, were still experiencing it in their own workplace. So, if you look at some of the panels that I've put together, there's some, there's a couple of very big, clear statements being made here about wanting to deliver safe workplaces. It's complex across the whole sector, I get that, but we've dealt with complex issues before.

But then we go to the artist as creator. A number of the training colleges that we have for different art forms are at breaking point right now. I'd love to be in a situation to, say, from the end of the year, we're at, "How do we advance? How do we go over the hill? How do we make everything so much better with respect to training."? Some of the infrastructure I'm looking at the moment, I'm trying to come up with policies, is how do we keep the training colleges alive? There are some that are doing really well, there are some where there are real challenges that I want to work through. But the training doesn't begin when people leave school. I am alarmed at the number of parts of Australia now where it is possible to go through the entire schooling system without ever having a music teacher, a drama teacher, or an art teacher. Really concerned about it. Because the training in schools isn't simply just, how do you form artists, it's also, how do you create audiences? How do you make sure that people understand various art forms that give them that entry point on the way through, all of that benefits?

The final thing I want to say about the artist is I'm concerned with the artist as creator, and this differs art form to art form, but for a significant number of art forms there seems to be a view that if you're a woman, it's often in your 20s, if you're a man, sometimes it's your 30s and 40s, but effectively there is a view that your talent immediately disappears at a particular age. I want to see what we can do to deliver long-term career paths so that our most talented creators can spend their professional life as creators. I'd really love us to be able to deliver that.

Strong institutions. Now, when I start with Strong Institutions, we've got the obvious ones. All the ones that are government-funded, whether it be federally, state, or by local government, the galleries, the collecting institutions, all of those form the foundation of what we talk about when we talk about strong institutions. But the Strong Institutions this time, similar to when I referred to the artist where I said we weren't just wanting to look at artists as creator, we were wanting to look at artists as worker; similar to that, I'm wanting to make sure, when we look at Strong Institutions, we're not simply looking at the institutions that are effectively owned in different ways by government bodies.

Now they used to, when I was, when I was Arts Minister in 2013, you had this really strong view of you had your sector that was viewed as a funded sector, you had a sector viewed as philanthropic, and you had a sector that would come to me and they'd describe themselves as, "Proudly commercial. Don't take a cent from the government." After the last two years, they've all taken money from the government. Everybody has. So, I want to make sure, and I'm also really conscious that the commercial sector, regarded as commercial sector as well, has the same workforce. If you're doing a national tour as a contemporary musician, you will have effectively a size of crowd that you are able to attract. And unless you can get in every city or regional centre a venue of that size, you don't go to that place. And so, if we had lost a significant number, say, of 300-person venues, of 90-person venues, or of 700-person venues, national tours in Australia for touring artists were going to fall off a cliff. We got really lucky. And there are venues now saddled with an incredible amount of debt, but are still running, not because it's the most commercial use of the premises, but because there's a particular passion from the owners in wanting to host a venue similar with the independent gallery sector. So, for Strong Institutions, that's something where I want to make sure that we look at the commercial sector in that way.

To be able to do that, I'm really interested in how we can expand the policy agreement of the Australia Council. I would love to have the Australia Council not simply as a funding body, but as a fearless policy body that is willing to go out and argue for the sector no matter which part of the sector it is and whether or not it matches my view as a minister of the day. I want the Australia Council to be able to do that. That's really the main reason why Creative Partnerships, which has done the job it was asked to do, but I'm wanting to bring that work back within the Australia Council. 'Cause one of the impacts was the philanthropic, philanthropists largely just went to Creative Partnerships rather than come into the Australia Council and that affected the culture of the Australia Council and who the Australia Council have been dealing with. I want them to be engaging much more closely with the philanthropic sector and the commercial sector as well to be able to be a serious voice for government policy, as the cultural voice for the sector.

So, there's some policy issues that I'm really wanting to be able to work through. I will say, with everything about Strong Institutions and with about funding, I just want to rule something out, in case you're putting in your submission, I want to have been upfront; I have no interest in any policy or any funding body or any fund where a government minister makes the decisions about artistic merit.

That takes us then to Audience. Now, with Audience, let me start with a few different concepts that I'm really interested in. So, a lot of what I've spoken about sort of distinguishes between who's an artist and who's an audience member. I'm really interested and open to the importance of the areas where those lines are blurred as well. Similarly, I'm conscious of where you might become an audience member without actually having intended to turn up to anything. Public art exhibitions, I think, can be fascinating. So, I'm really conscious of audience when we attend, intend to be audience. I'm also really interested in art that is suddenly confronting you, that's causing you to question, or might be an art form that you didn't actually intend to be receiving when you first turned up.

Similar to that, though, I'm conscious, as I said before, that there will be stories where the audience is very local and very targeted and very important, and they'll be moments where we want to be able to take the story to the world. But one place where I want to be able to take the story is to continue to take it to the lounge room. The relationship we care about is between the viewer and the material. And it would be unforgivable if we let a moment pass which results in future generations basically taking potluck as to whether they ever see an Australian story on screen. It's only a bit over a year, maybe two years since children's quota were taken out of free-to-air. Have a look at what's happened to children's TV content. It's just fallen off a cliff. It's gone. There's a reason why we need quotas in Australia. We have a natural disadvantage, an unfixable disadvantage, because we predominantly, not exclusively, but we predominantly speak the same language as the United States, as Canada, as the UK and you put them together you have a wealth of content that is cheaper, that is cheaper to produce simply because, cheaper in terms of per view or more economic to produce, simply because of the number of viewers available to them. The only way to give our screen producers a decent chance is to make sure that we have quotas. And I want to land on a decision on screen quotas for streamers in this process this year.

The other aspect of Audience, though, is the audience beyond Australia. Now, yeah, the work, and Josh and Patrick and I, we've all had conversations about this. We have a real challenge right now, and you would've seen the work that Penny Wong's doing in trying to improve Australia's relationship with our region, you know, to our north, to our west, to our east, and there's a lot of work needing to be done. That work is made easier through cultural diplomacy. And what we can do, not simply, you know, what we can do in terms of the works from the region being toured here is important, what we can do in terms of our works being toured elsewhere is important; but what we can do in terms of fostering ways that, with the region, we create new work together. That's the sort of thing that really causes lasting, unbreakable bonds.

I'm interested in ideas that people have. But sometimes the international work is not about cultural diplomacy. Some of it is about straight revenue for artists and for the industry. And I'm committed to that as well. For all the frustrations that people have with streaming revenue, because streaming revenue is just a fraction of what DVD sales or album sales used to be, but you can at least leverage extra if people get an international audience. So, some of it's nothing to do with foreign affairs but a lot to do with trade and a lot to do with artists' incomes. Wherever we can use this opportunity, the whole of government exercise of bringing everything together to be able to deliver that, I want to find a way. And it'll be the ideas in this room that help us get there.

So, they're the five pillars: First Nations; A Place For Every Story; Centrality Of The Artist; Strong Institutions; and The Audience. Across those five, we can bring in all the principles that we need to.

To get there, though, I need your help with submissions. If we get this right, the difference it makes is really exciting. If we get this right, we end up with big works of scale happening where they start with our own. If we can have beautiful works of art then find their ways into new iterations, the story gets told and retold, the different works where we start with something and we build and we build gives us works of scale. And I

want those works of scale to come. I want our different stories to be so familiar. And sometimes an artwork will be a story, will be a narrative, sometimes it'll be an idea, sometimes it'll be an emotion. It'll take all different forms but it will all start with Australian creativity. And if we get this right, what it means is those forms of creativity will be part of what it is to live in Australia. As you grow up in Australia, the films that you see, that you then force your children to watch years later, are more likely to be our own. The novels that you're reading in schools will be more, will be increasingly stories where you are learning about different parts of your own country and different stories within your own community. It'll be that the music that you hear in years to come. And we've all got songs where when you hear the music it takes you back to a particular moment. I want our music to be the soundtrack of what it is to live in Australia. And that is all possible if we get this right. I want at the end of this year for us to just turn that corner. And if we do that, life in Australia does change. People knowing each other better does happen. People learning about our communities does occur. And the power of our creativity just hits us.

You know, I'm at one level, at many levels actually, incredibly jealous of what you all do. You know, for the three of us, if we're developing a policy and getting the law through, ultimately after a few years, if we've got it all right, we start to affect how people feel in their daily lives. If you are involved in narrative, you change how people feel on a roller coaster of emotions as you take them through it. If you are involved in music, you can change how people feel from that first bar. If you are involved in the visual arts, you can change how people feel from the first glance in that situation where our watch is telling us to leave and our legs are now controlled by our hearts telling us to stay as we just drink in the depth of a work. What you do is extraordinary. I can't do what you do. But if we get this right, we can give a higher stage for you to do it from, a bigger canvas and we can crank up your volume. And if we do all of that, it'll affect how Australians see themselves, how we know each other, and how the world knows us. So, let's get to work.