

National Cultural Policy Submission

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What is 'Culture'?

The 'culture' of any human society includes all creative activities of that society: its myths, religions, philosophy, history, language, literature, music, dance, visual arts (including film), technology and science; and beyond this, everything from cuisine to fashion, architecture, 'design', everyday utensils, social and political institutions, our value systems, rituals etc. The freedom of imagination is fundamental to it. *All* human activity is culture. Every human society engages in this, but the products of every society are distinctive to itself.

These activities have three primary functions: to benefit that society – which means that what we now define as the Arts & Humanities are no less important than technology and science, and merely benefit us all in different ways – to express the values and beliefs of that society in ways that have tangible effects, but also to apply a critical, questioning perspective to our society and ourselves as individuals, which never accepts a status quo, which recognises our dangers and short-comings and challenges us to change. This would be the basis of any historically determined understanding of what culture is.

Normally, all of these things would have palpable meaning to all members of that society, they would have access to them, they would all have opportunities to participate in them, and they would not be considered as status symbols or as accessible or meaningful to some but not to others. They would be accepted and respected by those who may not wish to participate in them as still belonging to their society and cultural identity. Unfortunately, in Australia we are confronted by entrenched problems in how culture is viewed, how it used, who has access to it or can participate in it, and what it means to people. We have traditionally never valued culture in the ways that more obviously 'cultured' societies do, and this is a problem of national attitudes over generations, not the failure of any one government; many Australians didn't think we 'needed' the Sydney opera house at the time it was planned.

Australia has a rich and vibrant cultural life, at least in some quarters, with many annual festivals, awards, and world-class performers; but these often operate on shoestring budgets, and employment is insecure, not legally protected, and insufficiently remunerated. At the same time, we have long spoken of our 'cultural cringe', an embarrassment about or indifference towards 'culture', and about our 'culture wars', whereby some areas of our cultural and academic life are attacked, excluded rather than included, and which in international contrast look like an obstinate anti-intellectualism (this is particularly conspicuous in periodic attacks on our Arts & Humanities university departments). Many creative Australians have also been part of our 60-year long 'brain drain', because they have felt forced to seek opportunities abroad due to a lack of support in their own country, because we do not have or recognise the same cultural traditions of older countries, and because they have felt that Australia was a culturally infertile society within which to work. Australia has also had one of the more egregious histories of the censorship of culture amongst western democratic societies. We have a schizophrenic attitude towards what we call 'elitism', which tends to include 'culture'. In these ways, we remain a very divided society that continues to pose many challenges to its most creative citizens.

This policy development is promising, but it is only a beginning. The five pillars which define it are too narrow for a comprehensive and mature conception of culture, and numerous areas of our community which engage with or are responsible for culture risk being excluded or have indeed been overlooked, especially, our entire education system, which should be central in the cultivation and understanding of culture. Other aspects of our modern society also threaten the viability of cultural

activities. Australia should establish a dedicated federal Ministry of Culture and portfolio on the model of many other countries that have had these for decades.

Culture is an organic product of society. Its generation and use should be facilitated, but it cannot be manufactured artificially, and it cannot be controlled and manipulated to serve particular priorities and interests.

Culture and Commerce

While it is crucially important that all who are engaged in any area of cultural activity need to be able to be educated and trained to exercise these activities as professions, culture should *not* be viewed as an economic means of benefitting this country, and we should *not* think of skills training here in the way we do, for example, with trades. To think about it in purely pecuniary terms is to destroy the very nature and purpose of what culture should be. Some areas of culture have already been ruined by processes of commercialisation and opportunism (e.g. elements of Indigenous culture), while other commercial decisions have denied Australians access to sources or products of culture that they should have access to (e.g. non-existent distribution of foreign-language literature, films etc. in Australia; our own literature becoming out of print).

Cultural activities will make an economic contribution if they are and remain financially viable, if they attract sufficient on-going or permanent investment, which must come primarily from government. It is normal in western countries that have a strong sense of their cultural identity and traditions that the continued production and dissemination of their cultural activities are underwritten by government; in Australia, government has always sought to reduce as far as possible any public investment in numerous important or essential services, and that attitude must change. The private sector may sponsor or subsidise cultural activities, but it cannot be relied upon to permanently support them, Australia does not have a tradition of private philanthropy and endowment in the sense that America has had, and the costs of delivering many cultural activities far exceed income usually generated by them (although this is perhaps more true in some than in others). If, as seems desirable, all Australians regardless of class and income should be able to attend performances and festivals, for example, this would also need to be subsidised by government. Australia will not have an effective cultural policy without government's willingness to spend sufficiently on it. This should include more, and much more generous, liveable, and flexible financial support for all categories of artists not directly supported by companies or other organisations.

Countries such as France and Italy have succeeded in making their cultural activities highly profitable, combined with strong government subsidies, while many other countries have achieved similar success in niche sectors, but this requires a very high level of education and (support for) innovation, maintaining high quality and standards, and producing recognisable elements that others want. Australia has the potential to also achieve this in some sectors, such as film and other performing arts, but these would need to be much better and more permanently funded and marketed than they have been. In this and in other respects, all of Australian society would need to regard culture as being as important and as self-evident to us as sport is.

Australia is now a Land of Many Cultures, not One: What does that Mean?

While it is laudable to recognise the importance of Indigenous culture, Australia is today a *multi-cultural* society. This means that we are home to peoples from almost every country in the world, each of which has its own culture. If we are to be genuinely inclusive, we will recognise *all* of those cultures in all of their diversity and complexity, we will accept all of them as constituting an Australian culture, and we will ensure that all of them are sufficiently represented in our mainstream cultural venues, and in our education systems. Being multicultural means that the integrity of multiple cultures is preserved by their representatives in this country, but at the same time, that they all contribute to something distinctively 'Australian'. It does not mean transforming the many into one, and the creation of anything distinctively 'Australian' cannot be forced.

We tend to think of whatever being 'Australian' means as starting from our arrival in this continent. We do not understand that all of the early settlers, all of the immigrants who have arrived here since 1788, have brought pre-existing cultures with them, and that our entire society and all of its institutions – excepting only those of the Indigenous population - have been formed somewhere else. This should mean that the millennia-long and –old histories, languages, literatures, philosophies, and arts of all of the countries from which we have all come should be viewed as being part of our 'Australian' cultural identity, and they should be taught as such. Equally, every more recent immigrant also brings cultural traditions and identities with them that have been formed in other countries over millennia, and these, too, should be understood as being part of Australian culture. Insofar as they have been brought here by those immigrants, they remain meaningful to those immigrants and their descendants, and as such are now part of whatever it means to be 'Australian'. Even what we call 'white Australian' culture is not merely British: it includes the cultures of every other European country as well.

All of these cultural legacies will continue to inform the development of an Australian culture. At the same time, Indigenous culture cannot have the same meaning and importance to non-Indigenous Australians as it has for Indigenous, and the history and culture of Anglo-Saxon Australia does not have the same meaning for more recently arrived immigrants as it has for those who have lived here for generations and for whom that legacy is palpable. How each of us creates and adopts a cultural identity depends upon the traditions with which we have grown up, which we have inherited, and which are most meaningful to us. The process by which all of these traditions become 'Australian' requires generations; it cannot be forced or pre-determined. We are today neither a purely Indigenous nor a 'white' Australia.

Culture and Education

A society normally preserves and communicates its culture by every member in that society participating and valuing cultural activities and the uses of that culture, and through the education of its young people. In Australia, many people do not value many elements of our culture or have access to it; it is not used by them as culture normally would be used, nor is it part of how they view themselves as Australians. At best, they value only selective elements.

Neither our schools nor our universities (and Arts colleges) are providing the entire population with a meaningful and comprehensive *understanding* – not merely a knowledge - of our culture. For decades, education policy has prioritised national economic subjects, and that has directly led to chronic under-funding of Arts & Humanities departments, cutting of curricula, insufficient research funding, loss of academic staff, and other problems. Some discipline areas widely funded, taught and researched in other countries cannot be found in one single Australian university. And yet whatever our 'culture' is, it resides primarily in our Arts & Humanities university departments. Those problems continue, and if our universities, which also train all of our school teachers, are to provide a full range of teaching and research into all areas of culture, including those of more recent non-white immigrants, then our entire education system will require enormously increased, permanent funding, massive expansion of the rump it has become, as well as addressing the many other issues within it (which cannot be itemised here).

Universities are public resources that should serve the entire community, not only fee-paying students, but to do so, they must permanently employ sufficient academic specialists in all areas of our culture, the knowledge of those academics must be available to the entire community, and they must abandon any notion of 'demand'. It should be assumed that sufficient demand for public knowledge of all areas of the Arts & Humanities permanently exists, and that universities have an obligation to meet that demand. If we are to produce a second winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, we will need to support writers able to create a respectable body of work reflecting not nationalistic or parochial but universal relevance and interest, as well as possessing a breadth of education at least equalling that of Patrick White – or that of other such winners.

It ought to be possible for every Australian to study any aspect of any culture represented by any (other) Australian at at least one university in every state and territory, without fee discrimination, and without the expectation that they should be doing this for employment purposes or any national economic benefit. This should be regarded as a universal human right.

Australia should mandate the compulsory learning of at least one foreign language throughout high school to functional spoken, written and comprehension fluency by Year 12, with the opportunity of learning more than one. This has been standard practice in most other countries for decades. In order to better learn a second language, the teaching of grammatical English and written expression would also need to be drastically improved over current practice, not only for better use of English but also as a foundation for the learning of other languages. While it would be appropriate to attach some importance to Asian-Pacific languages, there should also be sufficient opportunity for the learning of European, Middle-Eastern and African languages, as well as Indigenous languages, and Greek and Latin. Our universities should also have the capacity to teach other languages no longer spoken for research purposes, as indeed other countries do.

Language learning provides access to other cultures not available through translation, which extends far beyond use of the language itself, and it also demonstrates respect for the cultures of those other languages. The effect of our national ignorance of other languages conveys a message of contempt towards other societies, and undermines the sincerity of our multiculturalism.

Australia does not have an adequately funded publishing industry of our own, which in other countries would be part-funded by government, that ensures that all literature considered culturally important remains in print and affordable to everybody. This would need to be removed from control by multinational publishing houses, or they would need to be more closely regulated. Books (and other goods and services) in Australia, whether published here or imported, are excessively expensive, and blatant price gouging is occurring. Similarly, we have no adequate national distribution of foreign-language literature, films, music or other culturally important products at cost price in their respective countries of origin. Much that should be easily available here is not, which deprives Australians of culturally important products, while what is available is excessively overpriced. This situation has been partly caused by government, and it represents a serious cultural impoverishment not equalled in any other developed country.

Culture is also collective memory – past experience we should be able to draw upon to shape our future. Some countries consider the preservation and public availability of their cultural heritage to be sufficiently important that they permanently invest in things like film and other archives, and maintain exceptional museums; Australia's record on archival maintenance is dismal.

The public broadcasters the ABC and especially SBS are also crucial to public accessibility of our culture. Funding of both broadcasters must be proportionately increased to ensure that they are able to provide regular and representative programmes that present, inform, and discuss all areas of culture. SBS was specifically established as a means of both providing new Australians with broadcasts of interest to them and of better informing Australians about the cultures of our multicultural population. Inadequate funding and poor programming for SBS have ensured that it is not doing the best it could; numerous cooking programmes are not the best means of improving our knowledge and understanding of cultures, and we should invest in more Australian-produced educational documentaries.

The Function of Culture

Culture is not something you engage in one evening a week with a season ticket, or our Sunday best that we put on for special occasions, or some background noise. It is not a means of feeling patriotic. Culture is how we all think, how we view and engage with the world, how we reflect upon our existence and our problems, how we conduct public discourse – it is a prism. Normally, we would do this through the stories we tell, through critical reflection upon and understanding of history (both

our own and others'), through philosophy. Even popular culture and theatre function in this way. None of this is pure entertainment, and it is certainly not something we do for pecuniary profit. There should be no embarrassment, and no mockery from others, about discussing Plato or Kant (in the absence of any comparable Australian philosopher), for example, when we publicly discuss society, democracy, ethics, the crises we face, or about doing so through whichever literary texts we prefer, because all of these things are themselves such engagements with society and the world in which we live. Some societies conduct public discourse on this level – we do not. We should be able to discuss ideas *qua* ideas, on their merits, and not in terms of ideological or other bias. Compared with many other developed societies, the general educational level in Australia that would be required to support this is poor. Culture should enable us to all reflect constructively upon our life and times and to aspire and achieve something better. That also means using culture critically, if needs be against itself (as so much culture has done especially in recent centuries), because culture can be and is often misused, or suppressed. In this way, too, it serves all of us. Culture is not only personal expression, or knowledge: it exists to be *used* to our benefit, when we embody and live our culture(s).

"What good is a new national cultural policy without history?" — <https://theconversation.com/what-good-is-a-new-national-cultural-policy-without-history-188741>

"A new national cultural policy is an opportunity for a radical rethinking of the importance of culture in Australia" — <https://theconversation.com/a-new-national-cultural-policy-is-an-opportunity-for-a-radical-rethinking-of-the-importance-of-culture-in-australia-188720>