

# National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As an individual

20 August 2022

I offer this submission in my capacity as an arts educator and practitioner, particularly in the field of music. I grant permission for this submission to be published on-line under my name.

I provide some brief responses to the five Pillars below.

- *First Nations: recognising and respecting the crucial place of these stories at the centre of our arts and culture*

Australia's national identity itself is, by virtue of its history, inescapably multi-faceted and contested. Our cultural life *ought* to be providing a high-profile and powerful space in which that multi-faceted and contested identity can be explored and enriched, and—especially with regards to the place of First Nations people in our collective imagination etc—reconfigured and reformed.

Our society, however, is currently disinclined to turn to the music, painting, dance, sculpture and so on, that is made or consumed here as having this central role to play in defining and shaping the nation's sense of its own past, present and future (as also evidenced by the former Federal Government's down-grading of the arts portfolio).

This apparent prevarication when it comes to matters cultural undoubtedly has many causes, chief of which would have to be our unsettled relationship with both the European colonial past and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples that accompanied it. For that reason alone, I support the prominence accorded to this Pillar. It is both right and appropriate that a primary area of support, interest, and concern for any national arts policy for Australia should be First Nations art and culture.

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

Australia is also now both a multicultural society and one geared (through trade and technology) to global cultural trends. Thus the notion of there being a singular 'established culture' is less and less sustainable as an idea. Governments wanting to be more prescriptive in terms of what cultural activity should be supported and valued face both a political, as a policy challenge.

Nevertheless, I would argue that diversity for diversity's sake is also not enough. Cultural policy needed to be more than a mere supporter of, and extension of, individual worldviews and self-interests, lest it be liable to encourage a society that is similarly atomised. Cultural policy has fundamental role to play in shaping and sustaining the nation's collective sense of

self; and a mature cultural policy must be more than merely the state supporting and celebrating what a populace already do and like.

Worthwhile (and, in particular, worthy of public support) cultural activity in this sense might better be conceived in terms of ideas and ideals that might ultimately help unite us; art that helps us all, say, to recognise and understand the needs of others, puts the greater good ahead of immediate self-interest or personal gain, and/or encourage our sympathetic imaginative capacity more generally.

Truly 'valuable' cultural activity would not have, then, merely to prove that it was immediately relevant to a particular group to be worthy of public support. It might (and in many cases perhaps should) also offer us experiences that are separated from our everyday experiences, or from our own time or place. Here, too, heritage (or 'museum') cultural activities could have as much a place as cutting-edge contemporary work; part of what a fully rounded national cultural life would do is help forge a bridge between our past and present, and between ourselves and others, as a foundation for imagining our shared future.

This is because, as former Prime Minister Paul Keating argued in a speech delivered just after he left office in 1996:

Culture and identity, the structures and symbols of our government and the way we define ourselves as a nation are not distractions from the concerns of ordinary people, their income, their security, their mortgage payments and their children's education and health. Rather, they are an intrinsic part of the way we secure these things.<sup>1</sup>

- *The centrality of the artist: supporting the artist as worker and celebrating their role as the creators of culture.*

This is laudable; I should like to emphasise, however, the need for governments to help re-establish strong educational pathways, especially in our tertiary institutions. Over the course of my working life, I have witnessed (both from the outside and inside) the comprehensive downgrading, and in some cases, the demolition, of established tertiary educational pathways in the creative and performing arts.

The recent changes by the former Federal Government to university funding models has further encouraged universities further to redirect resources away from these areas towards producing so-called 'job-ready' graduates for the Australian economy.

We urgently need to redress this situation and defend the integrity of arts education and the value of arts workers, above all to be our society's critic and conscience. This might require the Federal Government to consider, as part of a comprehensive Cultural Policy, revisiting the decisions made by a previous Labor Government in the late 1980s to force most of our arts training institutions into the fold of our metropolitan universities.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.paulkeating.net.au/shop/item/for-the-new-australia---11-november-1996>

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

Another crucial issue that currently does not receive the attention it deserves from cultural policy makers is the diminishing provision of suitable spaces—including rehearsal, exhibition, and performance venues in our cities and towns. Issues like the decline of licenced venues, the loss of broad-use and cheap-to-hire spaces such as community or church halls (and churches themselves), and the exorbitant cost structures that commonly accompany our major theatres and concert halls rarely garner high-level policy attention, but addressing this decline in basic accessible infrastructure is crucial to ensuring the survival of vibrant performance cultures across Australia as we come out of the COVID-19 crisis.

Considering ‘ecological’ problems such as this will require coordination across all levels of government to be effective. Might the Cultural Policy therefore consider the establishment of an all-levels government arts body that could conceivably consider, let alone implement, such proposals?

Another issue that requires a more wholistic (cross-government) policy perspective is the character of our major music performing institutions such as Opera Australia and the State Symphony Orchestras. Currently, much of the focus of these major classical music organisations is (barring the recent hiatus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) is directed to the international arts market: many of their musicians, soloists and conductors etc are sourced from across the globe. International arts management companies like HarrisonParrot, Askonas Holt, Intermusica, and IMG have come to dominate the flow of this human capital in Australia and that can distract the attention of these national ensembles away from a more fulsome engagement with, and responsibility for, local, regional, and national cultural and artistic contexts and concerns.

Equally, the continuing presence of, and in many cases flourishing, amateur, school or community based, orchestras (which, if they receive government support at all, are largely supported by local government) is almost never included in policy discussions at the state and federal level around orchestral funding. And yet, long-term community interest and support for such forms of music-making will ultimately be secured at this level more than anywhere else

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

The increasing ubiquity of broadband internet alongside innovations that arose as a result of the pandemic, has made the possibility of at least partially replicating, supplementing, or even replacing some of the traditional modes of arts education and engagement with on-line delivery. This has obvious benefits in terms of cost of delivery and in defeating the ‘tyranny of distance’ that has helped to exclude access to such education to both socially disadvantaged and rural adults and children.

Significant opportunities now exist in this digitally enabled creative commons for educational and cultural institutions to help redress some of equity and access issues that beset our cultural life.

Similarly, the archive of material available to artists and their audiences alike on platforms like YouTube and Spotify is increasing exponentially. But it is also liable to be experienced chaotically; there remains an obvious and important role for arts organisations to assist in guiding and curating Australia's on-line consumption of culture.

This could be supported in the 'real' world by an expansion of artist-in-residence programs to regional areas and schools, and an increased funding for art centres in remote communities to expand both the local impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts in their communities but also its reach and impact on the wider nation.

However, the growing manipulative market power of the digital companies which provide the common platforms for such content, means that any sense of empowerment facilitated by these technical developments must be weighed against the threat they create of cultural and economic manipulation on an unprecedented scale. It is not just our personal privacy but our very imaginative lives also risks being corralled and entrapped by such technologies.

Here again, the role of Government in setting a clear vision, backed up by strong policy settings and incentives will be vital.

In sum, there are great opportunities for a reengaged arts and cultural policy to make a transformative difference to the nation across these five Pillars.

Yours sincerely,

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