

## **Submission to the National Cultural Policy** ***Dr Ben Eltham, Monash University. August 2022.***

### **About this submission**

I am a Lecturer in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University, where I research and teach about the arts and culture of Australia. For the past two decades, I have written extensively about Australian culture as a critic, essayist and journalist. I have also worked as a festival director, creative producer and contemporary musician. This submission reflects my academic expertise as well as my lived experience in culture.

### **First principle: The Commonwealth should support art and culture because of the value and meaning it brings to Australian citizens**

The arts and culture are very important to Australians. According to very robust data from the Australia Council's National Arts Participation Survey, the majority of all Australians enjoy art and culture as part of their everyday lives.

The arts are a source of deep value and meaning to the lives of Australian citizens across many dimensions: social, democratic, civic, linguistic, historic, economic and, of course, artistic. This value is not abstract, but rather visceral and personal. Our love of culture inheres in the stories we tell, the songs we sing, the images we make, and the ways that we dance and laugh.

For this reason, it is appropriate for the federal government to continue to offer a wide range of policies to support the production and consumption of art and culture, including funding programs, laws and regulations, cultural institutions, and department arrangements in the machinery of government.

In particular, it is important for any national cultural policy to affirm and safeguard the intrinsic value of culture. The arts employ many Australian workers and are a source of economic value. But the appropriate rationale for a federal cultural policy is not economic, or even social, but *cultural*: not just 'art for art's sake' (although it is important to support culture for its own value and in its own terms), but policy that helps deliver the rich benefits of art and culture to the lives of ordinary Australians.

### **The necessity of a whole-of-government cultural policy framework**

A new cultural policy must also examine culture in all its complexity and diversity. The Office for the Arts is not the only 'silo' of federal cultural policy. The policy functions of the Department of Communications are crucially important to Australian arts and culture, including the support and governance of the public broadcasters, and the regulation of Australian local content for screen production. Trade policy is important because it regulates the trade of cultural goods and services. There is an important aspect of cultural policy relevant to foreign policy and "soft power" in the presentation of Australian culture to the world. Cultural policy should also encompass federal law reform, where copyright law is the critical intellectual property of culture. Some types of cultural subsidy, especially the screen production subsidies, are tax offsets and therefore touch on tax policy and regulation.

Many aspects of social and economic policy affect the arts and culture. In education, the national curriculum includes the arts, but the fractured state of post-Gonski school funding means there is not enough funding for many state and territory primary and secondary schools to offer high-quality arts education. Artists and cultural workers typically have low incomes and precarious working conditions (see below). For this reason, they are generally more vulnerable to economic insecurity, housing stress, and poverty. Policies that could strengthen the social safety net, increase the stock of affordable housing and improve the real wages of cultural workers are not in themselves cultural policies, but would have significant measurable benefits to the health of Australian arts and culture.

Finally, there is a major lack of robust cultural data and statistics. The ABS should be funded to re-establish cultural statistics series that have been halted or deprecated in recent decades.

### **The current economic environment for the arts**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the biggest disruption to the Australian live and performing arts since the Second World War. Large parts of the arts and cultural industries were shut down by public health

restrictions. There were devastating job losses amongst labour forces exposed to lockdown closures, especially in the performing arts, contemporary music, festivals and live events. The economic shock was deep and sustained, with a measurable “double dip” observable in the employment data corresponding to lockdowns in both 2020 and 2021. The disruption affected sectors that would not normally be thought of as exposed to health restrictions, such as literature, where many writers lost income due to the cancellation of speaking appearances and writers festivals. On the other hand, employment in some sectors of the arts was less affected, for instance in highly digital sectors such as design. Due to tight infection control, screen production was also reasonably protected, despite some high-profile production postponements such as the halt to the shooting of *Elvis*.

The availability of vaccinations and the easing of health restrictions from late 2021 has seen a partial recovery in economic activity in the cultural industries. There is still significant COVID-19 transmission in the community, and this continues to lead to cancelled productions and dampened audience figures. None-the-less, most venues have re-opened and major musicals and festivals have returned. Employment has bounced back, but the pandemic shock has created major dislocations in the cultural labour force, with many workers leaving the cultural industries during the 2020-21 to work in other occupations. As a result, there are looming skills shortages in some cultural occupations, such as audio-visual technicians, event staff, and stage crew. Many cultural organisations have run down their reserves and face uncertain futures. New problems such as high energy costs and supply chain disruptions are also emerging.

### **Federal cultural policy response to the pandemic was inadequate**

Federal policy in response to the crisis was patchy and inadequate. JobKeeper subsidies were effective supports for many cultural businesses and organisations; however, due to JobKeeper’s design quirks, not all organisations or employees were eligible for the subsidy (for instance, cultural facilities operated by public universities and local governments were excluded from JobKeeper, as were casual employees who had less than 12 months service with their employer). The \$220 million RISE program was also only partially effective in providing economic stimulus to the cultural sector. The RISE program’s policy design meant that it provided important financial support to those organisations that won funding, but nothing to those that missed out. On the whole, federal pandemic stimulus to the arts and culture was welcome, but not commensurate with the very deep recession in the sector. Most notably, with JobKeeper ended and RISE winding down, federal stimulus is being withdrawn while economic activity is still recovering.

### **Priorities for the new cultural policy**

A new national cultural policy must have a wide ambit. It requires significant ambition from the incoming Albanese government. There are four key priorities that a new policy must address:

- 1) Prioritise First Nations arts and champion cultural diversity
- 2) Increase public funding to reinvest in Australian public culture
- 3) Improve the income and security of artists and cultural workers
- 4) Safeguard Australian content through local content regulations and policies

### **Prioritise First Nations arts and champion cultural diversity**

Creative Australia made welcome emphasis of the richness of Australia’s First Nations arts and culture. However, since 2013, cultural policy priorities have again returned to a status quo advantaging European artforms and “high culture” sensibilities.

Australia’s First Nations arts practices include the oldest continuing cultural traditions on the planet, as well as some of the most exciting contemporary experimentation in music, performance, the visual arts, and poetry. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures must be placed at the centre of Commonwealth cultural policy, and critically, this policymaking should be led by First Nations artists and curators. Funding priorities should reflect this centrality.

Australia’s unique success as a multicultural and migrant nation must also be recognised and championed through dedicated cultural policy measures.

### **Increase public funding to reinvest in Australian public culture**

There is a demonstrable need for higher public investment in the culture at the federal level. There should be large increases in funding in the following areas. I have provided some estimated costings:

- Fund 300 Creative Fellows annually through the Australia Council with three-year fellowships to make art, investing \$83 million a year
- Increase the '4-year funding' round for the Australia Council to \$87 million annually, to support the funding of at least 200 small-to-medium cultural organisations with multiyear agreements
- Increase Australia Council funding for cultural projects through peer-reviewed competitive grant pools to \$46 million annually
- Increase the ABC's operational funding to \$1.1 billion annually, with the aim of funding more Australian content and more Australian journalism and newsgathering
- Invest \$1 billion in capital infrastructure to fund a new public streaming content platform that will stream free Australian content to all citizens. Create a permanent \$50 million a year content program for the new platform, to fund Australian content licenses and royalties on the platform
- Increase the annual budget in the Arts portfolio for the national collecting institutions to \$350 million, to increase funding for the National Gallery, National Library, Australian Museum, National Portrait Gallery and the other federal cultural institutions
- Introduce a dedicated funding program for art in the community of \$200 million a year, supporting arts activities such as dance and music schools, youth theatre, community choirs, music and art programs in aged care facilities, migrant and multicultural arts, community festivals, and art and culture programs in the community
- Expand funding to the Regional Arts Fund to \$20 million annually
- Introduce a permanent federal funding program of \$50 million per year for public interest journalism, using revenue from a digital content levy on big tech platforms.
- Introduce a permanent federal funding program of \$50 million per year for community broadcasting such as community radio, community TV, and the CBAA
- Double funding for the public lending right and education lending right schemes to approximately \$45m annually, with new funding of around \$23m annually
- Fund a National Year of Indigenous Dance for 2025 with \$6 million invested 2023-2035

### **Improve the income and security of artists and cultural workers**

Amongst the most glaring problems in Australia's cultural sector are the low wages and poor working conditions of artists and cultural workers. The Commonwealth can directly intervene in cultural labour markets through federal industrial relations policy. It should also use cultural policy to improve the lives of artists and workers:

- Regulate the "gig economy" to make contract-based artistic work more secure and less precarious
- Reform the relevant modern awards to raise the pay of artists and cultural workers
- Compel employers to offer permanent jobs to employees after two years of fixed-term contracts
- Fund 300 Creative Fellowships annually through the Australia Council (see above)
- Make secure full-time cultural jobs a condition of any companies receiving public arts funding, based on the Irish policy model of paying artists. Work with the states and territories to harmonise this policy with state and territory-funded cultural institutions.

### **Safeguard Australian content through local content regulations and policies**

Australians love Australian music and screen content, but Australian content has fallen to dangerously low levels on many streaming platforms and broadcasters (under 5% local content on Netflix or Disney+, for instance). The Commonwealth should intervene to impose a robust local content regulation system, with a broad goal of one quarter of all content on streaming and broadcasting platforms being Australian made and created.

- Implement a 25% local content requirement on all streaming and broadcasting platforms
- Require platforms that do not meet content requirements to either increase local content or pay a levy to a merged content production fund that would fund Australian production
- Develop a simple and transparent test for Australian content similar to the Canadian 'MAPL' framework
- Reform Screen Australia's local content rules to exclude New Zealand content