



SUBMISSION ON THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

CURRENCY HOUSE is a not-for-profit organisation established by Katharine Brisbane, AM, the founder of Australia's leading performing arts publisher, Currency Press, in 2001. It promotes the engagement of artists in public affairs and publishes the long essay series Platform Papers by leaders in the performing arts, humanities, law and economics. Harriet Parsons, took over the directorship of Currency House with Julian Meyrick, the General Editor of the New Platform Papers, in 2021. Sixty-three issues of Platform Papers were published from 2004–2021 and the second volume of the New Platform Papers is forthcoming in December. Currency House held its second annual Authors' Convention in August, *From the Heart: the imperative for the arts*, to consider the implications of the Uluru Statement from the Heart for the National Cultural Policy.

PREAMBLE

If we take our lead as a country from our First Nations, art is the expression of the values and spirituality of a people gathered together, and it is this important purpose that Australian artists engage in on a daily basis. As we reflect on who we are as Australians, we are guided by the bold conviction that it is through our art that we come to know ourselves. The profound truth of our species is that what guides us is not the search for simple existence, but the search for meaning that finds its expression in art and spirituality, without which existence has no value. Every nation has come to be, through the act of creating art and poetry, and none has survived their departure. If Australia wishes to be great, it must recognise the greatness of its artists and, by embracing their art, turn Australia into the kind of creative country everyone longs to live in.

WE OFFER three recommendations for the government to consider in its consultation for a new National Cultural Policy, the primary one being a living wage for arts workers.

A LIVING WAGE FOR ARTS WORKERS

A living wage is the foundation of any economic sector, but this essential requirement has never been addressed in an Australian arts policy.

As largely itinerant workers, artists live insecure lives, and their willingness to work for love undercuts the principle of market competition. At the same time, the grants system was never intended to meet the ordinary needs of the sector as a whole, but to reward outstanding individuals. The standard of excellence sets the bar high, but the minimum standard, that recognises the majority, is missing. This minimum standard is essential to support the professionals—the 'jobbing actors', skilled technicians and administrators—who make the work of the stars possible.

The growing number of crises confronting the nation is demanding a new approach from government, that protects individuals by supporting their communities. A living wage for artists should be included among the measures the government is currently considering more generally for improving infrastructure, expanding services and increasing wages for low-income earners. The scheme for a living wage for artists proposed by Currency House is a non-inflationary measure for *assisting low-income workers and increasing domestic productivity that puts First Nations first*.

The Arts Workers' Stipend

The Arts Workers Stipend is a job guarantee for arts workers. It is based on a proposal for a universal job guarantee put forward by Noel Pearson which we will be publishing in the next volume of the New Platform Papers. A job guarantee makes the government the 'employer of last resort' and Pearson lists three economic benefits:

1. It lifts the income of the poorest Australians to a decent level.
2. It gives people all of the intangible personal, psychological and social benefits that come with work.
3. It achieves full employment without increasing inflation.

The job guarantee is non-inflationary, he explains, because *'it works as an automatic stabiliser in the economy: the pool of workers in the scheme rises and falls with the economic cycle. In a downturn the pool grows and when the labour market picks up the pool shrinks close to zero.'*

The Arts Workers' Stipend (AWS) should be available to all arts workers, administered through the Australia Council and parallel the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA). Associating the AWA with the APA would link this new allowance to an existing standard.

Importantly the APA is tax free. An AWS of the same amount—\$24,653 in 2022—would therefore allow an individual arts practitioner to earn a further \$21,884 before they begin paying tax. This would equate to a gross income of approximately \$50,000 per year—i.e. a low-level professional salary. The use of tax offsets would allow the government to provide significant financial support to arts workers via a relatively modest stipend.

Administration of the AWS

The Australia Council's application processes are familiar to arts workers and involve well-established systems of peer review. Awarding the stipend would follow the APA model, with applicants approved in three stages:

Stage 1: Acceptance of the initial application. CV, portfolio and references. The entry phase would set a low bar and establish the applicants' track record as a cultural practitioner. We recommend that, in addition to applications from arts workers directly, the Council also accept applications from groups on behalf of arts workers who are making a significant contribution to their community.

Stage 2: Confirmation after one year. A closer examination of the applicants' work and their contribution to the arts sector, their community or peer group.

Stage 3: Permanent acceptance into the scheme after five years. The final phase would show which applicants had established a permanent career in the arts and were in need of a permanent stipend, while those who withdraw will not be disadvantaged by their years of contribution to the arts. The stipend could be increased at this stage to allow arts workers to give up employment in sectors not related to their creative practice.

Peer Review. Peer assessment over five years provides an effective protection against fraud, with references and recommendations from communities providing further safeguards that are also supportive of the applicant.

Phasing in. This program would be phased in gradually because it requires recipients to apply for the stipend. It could be regulated further by capping the number of new stipends offered each year.

First Nations First

The Arts Workers' Stipend would be especially important for Aboriginal artists who produce Australia's highest arts export earnings. At the recent Currency House convention, APY artist Sally Scales described shocking exploitation of Aboriginal artists who have been trapped into financial slavery by unscrupulous dealers through debt obligations that can never be repaid. The economic autonomy provided by a stipend could prevent Aboriginal artists from falling into this trap, while benefitting the community as a whole by supporting a career path that strengthens the connection to culture. The AWS would effectively be placing 'First Nations first' by allowing Aboriginal communities to capitalise on their commercial success and provide cultural leadership to the nation through the autonomous voice of their artists.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

An End to the 'Efficiency Dividend'. Our second recommendation is the immediate cessation of the imposition of efficiency dividends on the budgets of cultural and creative institutions. These no longer promote efficiency (if they ever did) nor do they produce a dividend. Reducing budgets and shortening production times as a regular administrative practice leads to poor outcomes. Over time, it cripples the institutions to which these regressive measures are applied.

Return to Collegiality. Our final recommendation is for a return to collegiality in relations between the arts and government. We would like to see the Minister and Office of the Arts staff prioritise the development of congenial relationships with artists and arts organisations and characterise the arts as a humanising sector in our economy, rather than an underperforming 'industry' in all government communications; promoting the arts by using Australian actors, designers and directors in its messaging and as an instrument of 'soft diplomacy' internationally, including its Indigenous Foreign Policy; employing arts workers in government arts bureaucracy, particularly at the Australia Council; and restoring the arm's length status of the Australia Council as a mark of trust.

CONCLUSION

We commend the Minister for conducting the consultation, and strongly support the development of a National Cultural Policy. Measures to strengthen the work of cultural practitioners and institutions need not be complex. Simple initiatives aimed at improving the basic income of artists and the tone of government relations are achievable. In respect of an Arts Workers stipend, Currency House has spent considerable time developing this important potential policy initiative.

We would be pleased to assist the government in consulting on it further, including drawing on our wide range of authors and supporters in the arts and cultural sector.

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Bonus issue no. 63 (original series). Katharine Brisbane, *On the Lessons of History*

Volume 2 (forthcoming), *Arts, Culture and Country: the implications of the Statement from the Heart* [working title]

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Response from Tyson Yunkaporta, [title tba]

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Sally Scales, 'Art, Culture and the Voice'

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Q&A with Liza-Mare Syron

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