

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public and anonymous



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I am delighted to see a new National Cultural Policy being developed at a critical moment in Australian cultural life. Building on Revive, this consultation asks us to consider the long-term settings needed to support Australia's arts and culture. The policy rightfully places First Nations peoples and culture first. The policy framing is very good but greater weight must be given to the critical work of our national cultural institutions.

Among the five pillars of the new policy framework is Strong Cultural Institutions. This pillar is not simply one priority among equals. It is infrastructure upon which all pillars can be elevated. Without robustly funded national institutions, the ambitions of every other policy goal risk remaining aspirational.

With limited space here, I will focus on the National Library of Australia, whose collections I use most often as a writer (albeit one who writes as a hobby). The NLA is an active engine of Australian cultural life. Its pioneering development of Trove transformed how Australians engage with our history, creating one of the most widely used digital humanities platforms in the world, making primary sources freely accessible to researchers, writers, historians and citizens alike. Trove is democratic infrastructure for cultural participation. That is critically important at this moment in time. No other nation has created anything like Trove. It is an example of Australian ingenuity at its best and it shows what our cultural institutions can achieve.

The depth of the NLA's collection tells the story and history of this nation. The papers of Eddie Koiki Mabo, whose perseverance overturned the fiction of terra nullius, ensures such history remains accessible in culturally appropriate ways. Thousands of hours of oral history recordings document Australian voices over generations, including many First Nations and migrant voices. This collection includes the only known recordings of author May Gibbs and scientist Sir Howard Florey. Contemporary voices capture iconic Australians today. Many are accessible to the world via the internet. No future policy will recover what was allowed to disappear and it is critical this collecting continues.

Through legal deposit, the NLA performs a profound act of cultural equity: every Australian author who publishes has their work collected and preserved for the future. First Nations authors, regional writers, debut novelists and established voices alike benefit from this. Learning materials are used by my nephew in remote NSW.

Yet national cultural institutions have for too long been asked to do more with less. Successive efficiency dividends have eroded staffing numbers and capacity, constraining the ability of extraordinary institutions like the NLA to fulfil their untapped potential and national remit. The people who build and catalogue collections, digitise recordings, develop world leading systems like Trove and build community partnerships are not overhead. They are the mechanism through which a cultural policy becomes a reality.

The new National Cultural Policy has a genuine opportunity to reverse a long term trend. A modest but meaningful investment in staffing at national cultural institutions would unlock returns no other cultural expenditure could match. This would be measured in access and the confidence that comes from knowing our own culture and making sure those who have the expertise and to collect and preserve history for the future can do so.