

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public and anonymous



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I am an Australian philosopher specialising in ethics and value theory. I submit anonymously.

The paper asks what I would like to see in the next National Cultural Policy. My answer requires first naming what is wrong with this one.

The document is not a cultural policy. It is a political programme wearing cultural clothing. Its five pillars do not reflect genuine inquiry into what culture is for — they reflect the settled ideological commitments of a particular administrative class, presented as neutral framework. The language of belonging, inclusion, diversity and resilience is not descriptive. It is prescriptive. It tells Australians what their culture should value before the consultation has begun.

The First Nations framing illustrates this most clearly. Recognising the antiquity and significance of Indigenous Australian cultures is entirely appropriate. Mandating their structural primacy across all cultural policy — positioning every Australian's cultural life as downstream of a single approved heritage — is a different thing entirely. It is, paradoxically, a colonial gesture: the state determining which culture confers legitimacy on all others. Many Australians of diverse backgrounds have rich, deep, legitimate cultural inheritances that this framework cannot accommodate except as footnotes to Pillar One. That is not recognition. It is hierarchy enforced through bureaucratic sentimentality.

The paper also cannot distinguish between art and political action, because its authors largely do not believe the distinction exists. The result is a cultural policy hospitable to work that instrumentalises aesthetics for approved political ends, while offering no account of why formally serious, politically indifferent, or genuinely transgressive art deserves support. Art that challenges progressive consensus is not obviously contemplated anywhere in these five pillars. That is not an oversight. It is a structural feature.

What culture is for — the question any serious cultural policy must answer — receives no treatment here. Culture matters because human beings confront lives of genuine difficulty, moral complexity, and irreducible loss. Great art does not resolve these things. It inhabits them honestly. It is not a tool for social cohesion. It is frequently the force that ruptures false cohesion in the name of truth. A policy that cannot say this will fund managed mediocrity and call it a creative renaissance.

Australia has a genuine cultural character: sceptical of authority, resistant to utopian projects, darkly comic about human limitation. It does not need state cultivation. It needs the state to get out of its way — and in particular, to resist the temptation to make arts funding conditional on ideological legibility.

What I would like to see in the next National Cultural Policy is this: intellectual honesty about the difference between supporting culture and engineering it; genuine pluralism that does not resolve contested values into administrative pillars; and a commitment to artistic freedom that protects work the policy's authors would find uncomfortable.

If the policy cannot meet that standard, it should at least be honest about what it is.