



**Submission regarding the development of a new national cultural policy for
Australia, May 2026**

UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee

The UNESCO Memory of the World Program was established over thirty years ago with the aim of promoting the identification, appreciation, preservation and use of documentary heritage materials. The flagship activity of the Program is the UNESCO Memory of the World registers of iconic documentary heritage materials. These registers are the documentary heritage equivalents of the UNESCO World Heritage Register and the Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Memory of the World registers are maintained at global, regional (in our case Asia/Pacific) and national levels.

The Australian Memory of the World Committee was established in 2000. It maintains and promotes the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register, which now has inscribed almost 100 iconic documentary heritage items and collections. More information on the Australian Memory of the World Program can be found at <https://amw.org.au/>

Another key activity of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee is the 'Documenting Australian Society' initiative. This initiative commenced in 2018 with a national summit meeting in Canberra, which endorsed the 'Canberra Declaration'. Since then, the initiative has conducted numerous seminars/webinars on a variety of topics. It has also developed a Strategic Plan.

The Australian Memory of the World Committee urges the Australian Government to give prominence in the new national cultural policy to the importance of national planning and coordination for identifying, managing, preserving and encouraging use of the nation's documentary heritage resources. We note that the existing policy, Revive, makes no explicit reference to the importance of documentary heritage as a means by which Australians can understand themselves and how Australia can be understood globally. While the role of documentary heritage is hinted at in various places in the existing policy, it needs to be made much more explicit and should reference specific actions that need to occur to build a better, more representative and diverse national documentary estate. References to the importance of Australia's documentary heritage ecosystem should be made in Pillars 2 and 4 (A Place for Every Story; and Strong Cultural Infrastructure).

We commend to the Government the following information about our 'Documenting Australian Society' initiative, as a potential source of ideas and initiatives for the new national cultural policy.

VISION

Nationwide holdings of documentary heritage that are inclusive and representative of the wide diversity of Australian experience and endeavour, past and present.

MISSION

We will foster an ecosystem of research, planning and coordination that supports documentary heritage programs, practitioners and communities of practice, and that engages broadly across Australian society.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

*A wide diversity of programs and organisations across Australia, at national, state, regional and community levels, collectively devote considerable investments into identifying, acquiring and preserving documentary heritage materials that provide evidence of the rich, distinctive and complex nature of human endeavour in our country. When considered in its totality, how good a job does this national documentary ecosystem do of capturing and preserving a comprehensive and representative body of documentary heritage materials for the benefit of current and future generations? Are we getting and keeping 'the right stuff'? **Are there notable silences and gaps in our national holdings?** Are we maximising the 'bang for our bucks' in our investment in documentary heritage collections?*

To answer these important questions, we need to pursue research and consultation on Australia's documentary heritage needs, and analyse how well these needs are currently being addressed in our national, regional and community collections.

Once we have a better baseline understanding of the quality of our nationwide holdings and can identify areas that require targeted attention, we then need to put in place mechanisms for coordinating our responses to these identified action areas. Ultimately, the people of Australia will benefit from an agreed, defensible and evidence-based **National Documentation Strategy** that spans the entire Australian documentary heritage ecosystem.

GOALS

1. A **National Documentation Strategy** agreed by key industry and professional stakeholders and endorsed by governments.
2. An agreed, evidence-based **framework** (developed through research, dialogue and contestation) for mapping Australia's diverse documentary heritage needs and documentation gaps/silences.
3. Effective **coordination** of collection/acquisition/appraisal planning and activity spanning Australia's entire ecosystem of documentary heritage programs and

initiatives.

4. Support for diverse **communities** in their efforts to document aspects of Australian society, especially those of First Nations peoples. These efforts will assist self-determination in community-led documentation programs.
5. Inclusive, active, ongoing **discussion and improved community awareness** of the need to continuously improve the documentation of Australian society for the benefit of current and future generations.

CONSTRAINTS

- Funding for documentary heritage preservation will always be limited and must be spent wisely.
- Massive volumes of documentation are created every year in Australia, but only a tiny percentage of the totality can and should be preserved for the use of future generations.
- Deciding what to keep and what not to keep involves making hard decisions.
- The hard decisions made by documentary heritage programs and practitioners should be made with and by the wider Australian community, particularly underrepresented communities. These decisions must be defensible, transparent, consultative, evidence-based and made with reference to the wider body of Australia's distributed holdings of documentary heritage materials.
- The UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program has no source of regular funding. Therefore, any progress made on this strategic plan will rely on in-kind support from individuals, institutions and peak bodies.

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