

**National Cultural Policy Submission**

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Public

Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I support a vibrant, diverse and independent arts sector. However, my central question is whether Australia needs a government-led cultural policy at all, and if so, how such a policy can avoid becoming a mechanism for directing culture rather than supporting it.

The consultation paper states that cultural policy is intended to ensure that the arts are not treated merely as entertainment, but are recognised as central to national life, economic contribution, wellbeing and belonging. It also notes that cultural and creative activity contributed \$67.4 billion to the Australian economy in 2023–24 and employed more than 591,000 people. These are important points. Culture clearly matters. But the fact that culture matters does not automatically mean that government should define its preferred direction, themes, narratives or priorities.

Artists should be free to create work that is difficult, unfashionable, experimental, unpopular, politically inconvenient or simply commercially marginal. The danger of a national cultural policy is that funding decisions may gradually favour work that aligns with the government's preferred language, policy priorities or perceived social zeitgeist. This may not amount to explicit censorship, but it can still create a powerful incentive structure. Artists and organisations may learn to frame their work in ways that match policy pillars, grant language or fashionable narratives, rather than pursuing independent creative judgement.

This is especially important where the policy framework is built around broad normative concepts such as "A Place for Every Story", "Centrality of the Artist", "Strong Cultural Infrastructure" and "Engaging the Audience". These may all be defensible objectives. However, they also risk becoming filters through which public funding is allocated. The result could be a narrower cultural sector, not a broader one, if artists feel they must demonstrate alignment with official priorities to be considered legitimate or fundable.

Australia should avoid any drift towards a state-curated culture. I am not suggesting that Australia faces a literal "cultural revolution", but the phrase captures a real concern: when governments define culture too confidently, cultural production can become performative, politicised and bureaucratised. A healthy culture should be pluralistic, contested and sometimes uncomfortable. It should not be reduced to an instrument of government messaging, national branding, social cohesion policy or economic development.

If a national cultural policy is retained, it should be modest in scope. Its role should be to protect artistic freedom, reduce unnecessary barriers, support access to infrastructure, preserve heritage, and ensure transparent and politically neutral funding processes. Funding criteria should explicitly protect viewpoint diversity, aesthetic diversity and intellectual independence. Assessment panels should not reward ideological conformity, nor should applicants feel pressured to adopt government-preferred terminology to succeed.

The best cultural policy may be one that enables culture without trying to steer it. Government can support the conditions in which artists work, but it should be cautious about defining what Australian culture ought to say. Culture belongs to artists, communities and audiences - not to government.