

As an individual, a musician writer, deeply concerned with our nation moving forward together, I submit my thoughts and feedback on the proposed National Cultural Policy.

The paper's emphasis on "First Nations First" is clearly intended to recognise the profound importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australia's identity and history. That intention matters. Australia cannot honestly understand itself without acknowledging that First Nations peoples represent the world's oldest continuing cultures and have endured dispossession, exclusion, and historical injustice. Respect, preservation of language and heritage, and meaningful opportunity for Indigenous Australians are legitimate national goals.

However, framing "First Nations First" as a central organising principle for national cultural policy raises difficult questions about equality, citizenship, and the role of race in public life. While designed to promote inclusion, the language risks establishing a hierarchy of cultural legitimacy in which some Australians are symbolically elevated above others on the basis of ancestry. In a liberal democratic society built on equal citizenship, this can become divisive rather than unifying.

The concern is not with celebrating Indigenous culture itself. Most Australians support protecting sacred sites, supporting Indigenous artists, teaching Indigenous history, and ensuring Indigenous voices are heard. The concern lies in embedding race-based prioritisation into national institutions and policy frameworks. When government repeatedly frames one group as "first" in a political or cultural sense, it can unintentionally signal that other Australians are secondary participants in the national story.

Modern Australia is extraordinarily diverse. Millions of Australians trace their heritage to Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Pacific, while sharing commitment to the nation they now call home. A healthy cultural policy should aim to bind these people together under a shared civic identity rather than segmenting society into competing identity categories. Policies grounded primarily in ancestry risk encouraging cultural fragmentation instead of social cohesion.

There is also an economic dimension that deserves consideration. Sustainable cultural industries thrive through broad participation, merit, innovation, audience engagement, and commercial viability. When funding and institutional attention become heavily shaped by identity priorities, there is a danger that creative excellence becomes secondary to representational objectives. Over time, this can weaken public confidence in arts funding and discourage investment based on artistic quality and broad appeal.

A more sustainable approach would focus on removing barriers and expanding opportunity for all disadvantaged communities, including Indigenous Australians, without creating permanent symbolic hierarchies. Indigenous artists and communities should receive support where disadvantage or historical exclusion create unequal starting points. But support should ultimately aim toward empowerment within a genuinely shared national culture.

Australia's future is strongest when people meet one another as equals: equal in dignity, equal before the law, and equal in opportunity. First Nations cultures should be honoured because they are a priceless part of Australia's inheritance, not because one race should permanently occupy a higher moral or political position than another. True reconciliation is achieved not by elevating one group above others, but by building a nation confident enough

to say every Australian belongs equally and shares equally in the opportunities and responsibilities of our common future.