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Extended submission to the Office for the Arts regarding a new National Cultural Policy

The definition of culture needs to be taken in its broadest sense and I quote this from the Australian Bureau of Statistics:

‘A group's shared sense of meaning emerges from their *collective* experiences and *unique* historical and *environmental* circumstances. It imbues all their behaviours, giving them a collective personality - a character, or cultural identity. Thus culture can be defined as the shared sense of meaning that determines a group's way of life.’

What should be the shared sense of meaning embodied by an Australian National Cultural Policy?

This policy needs to recognise that first, Australia is a democracy – and our democracy is fragile. Democracy is already treated as a numbers game for those in power, regardless of political ideology, to undermine needed public ownership in favour of a restricted, private-for-profit economic agenda. And our cultural identity is connected with the unique place of our flora and fauna in the story of Earth.

This National Cultural Policy for multicultural Australia needs to be founded on acceptance of diversity and an insistence on the importance of human dignity, with recognition of the First Nations.

For these reasons, this policy for our future must value the retention of memory. That retention involves valuing all those voices which speak to and for the nation's *humanity*. These voices are in the creative realms – music, dance, visual arts, storytelling in all forms of literature whether poetry, prose, plays, or screen scripts – historical study and the languages that exist alongside those of the nation as a whole. They are also in the sciences, with stories of technological adaptations.

Those civic institutions, bypassed in the previous National Cultural Policy called Revive, must have the professionals to keep them dynamic. Some universities no longer train librarians! They are Australia's public universities, our public National, State and Territory libraries, museums, galleries, our national sound and film archives – Australia's role in that 20th century phenomenon must not be forgotten – our national, publicly-owned broadcaster, our climate-variable ecologically-valuable botanical gardens and each State's specific museums – AND our public universities.

They must be properly funded and not subject to political interference, which has had such a serious effect on the national War Memorial with its more militaristic focus in recent years.

An absence of concern for civic institutional heritage, in both State and National budgets, is allowing the knowledge and understanding of our *human*, socially-inclusive cultural identity to be depleted.

Democracy needs these reference points to survive all the capitalist, anti-public-good pressure it faces, especially from changing, unregulated forms of new media which show no concern for the physical environment on which our culture depends.

This continent has memory stretching back millennia, in physical and human terms. However, until recently, Australia's education system has concentrated overwhelmingly on the post-1788 history of this country. Britain's invasion brought in the Westminster system of government, with its checks and balances between our executive, bicameral legislature and judiciary in which all, theoretically, are equal before the law, with the High Court as ultimate arbiter of right or wrong under the 1901 Constitution with its various amendments.

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What impediments and barriers do we face in establishing a National Cultural Policy which would help us to have a *shared sense of meaning*?

We have begun to realise the importance of oral memory since recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples created and maintained societies which socially cohered through millennia before the invention of writing.

Central in their thriving before 1788 are the ARTS, which held and hold in memorable form their traditions and knowledge: the knowledge of Elders; the perpetuation of social foundations in human relations and cross-continental trade; found in story, dance, the music made from instruments of their environment, the visual work and methods of passing on information – e.g. message sticks – an awareness of the landscape’s natural features *and their sciences, engineering techniques and technologies* – evident in their inventions, the results of observation and need, with the consequent development of tools for different purposes and recognition of flora’s role in medicine – how different plants hurt or heal.

Knowledge and HEALTH – *their physical health undermined by imported diseases after 1788* – transferred across millennia, with education coming in stages of readiness through ritual, symbols and tests, making them able to fulfil all required for the community – their Country – to thrive, to be adaptable. They have shown it in so many ways since 1788, to maintain their existence – the oldest living culture on the planet – in the face of that pseudo-scientific, eugenics-based ‘White Australia’ here from 1901 – 1967, emblematic of this nation’s endemic racism – officially ended with the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 but still evident into the 21st century. Such a balanced approach to the gaining of knowledge.

This National Cultural Policy must recognise the cultures of other civilizations that have contributed to contemporary Australia – we recognise a range of languages in pre-tertiary examinations and need to acknowledge these aspects of our collective culture, which enrich the Australia of today and tomorrow.

At the same time, we need the strength to reject aspects of any culture, whether religion-or-tradition driven, that denies women the right to be responsible for decisions about their own bodies.

In 21st century Australia and looking into the next century – in the face of technological developments, the use and expected abuse of artificial intelligence – these civic institutions, which have expanding and changing roles given our increasingly diverse population across the Federation, must have proper funding.

The environment in which professionals work is not just a cultural one, it is a physical one as well. Thus, their buildings *as places of public community engagement* must be well funded, to be well maintained. So often the original buildings have heritage value. That is why this new National Cultural Policy is of supreme importance. As ‘smart’ phone communication technology is decreasing face-to-face engagement, these civic cultural and community-focused institutions require protection from political-ideological interference, which too often involves funding cuts.

The ‘Revive’ document did not consider those destructive processes going on in the national curriculum of pre-tertiary education, put in place by ACARA, which reinforce a binary notion of learning.

The sciences are NOT separate from culture. They are embedded in the arts, humanities and social sciences – and a nation shows its direction by how it treats the sciences, technologies, engineering, mathematics, humanities, arts and social sciences.

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From 2009 and especially since 2015 – in the interests of corporations rather than the nation’s shared sense of meaning – these disciplines have been treated by ACARA as though they are separate, through the acronyms of STEM and HASS. And the acronym HASS does NOT include the arts.

Considering our culture, we do not know about how we invest public money, or whether it is consistent with what we see as ‘our shared ethical way of life.’ It is also important not to allow our national cultural policy to be hijacked, by those for whom ‘Australian values’ are limited to and synonymous with *British, Western and Christian* values, when the 1901 Constitution is *secular*.

The binary education structure, put in place by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority that has, superficially, independence from government, has created a dichotomy in which ethics lies primarily with those disciplines making up the HASS acronym. The absence of the *arts* in that acronym tells any future-looking Australian why we are not thriving, as evidenced by the rate of suicides, high levels of illegal drug taking and gambling. The humanities are identified by ACARA as history, geography, business studies and – the ‘a’ only a conjunction – social sciences, which in some universities exclude the study of politics.

Any politician knows decisions are made by voters on an emotional basis. BUT there is no consideration of the effect of such felt response in decision-making. There is no examination of emotional intelligence in the way our young people are prepared for adulthood. The extreme mistake of that binary approach is evident, in assumptions that the sciences have nothing to do with poetry. Scientists can be poets. Poets can be forensic scientists, engineers, mathematicians, plumbers, environmentalists, immunologists, ecologists, film makers et al. Poetry with its rhythms, like story, is an integral part of social and cultural memory – for this Anglo-Celtic Australian born in 1933, it is Winnie the Pooh. I do not and cannot have the birth-right of kinship with a totem to which I belong and which I am expected to learn about and protect.

Notice that in this submission for our National Cultural Policy I seem to have given less consideration to the importance of the livelihoods of our artists, designers, musicians, composers, makers of musical instruments, singers, song writers, novelists, poets, playwrights, sculptors, dancers, choreographers, scientists, crafts-people, builders maintaining the physical places housing culture, and all the technicians essential for theatre and concerts, festivals and those free communal events. I expect the importance of livelihoods that are less precarious to be addressed by other submissions. We see this problem with WA Ballet deciding not to have the WA symphony orchestra, or the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, accompanying their ballet ‘Dracula’ in Adelaide.

We made that terrible error during the pandemic, of limiting the emergency money to what were seen as ‘businesses’ and anything that did not fit the narrow concept of business, as defined by the Treasurer then, was allowed to suffer and, for some, to die. Climate change too, plus the behaviour of insurance companies, has been undermining the living experience – the quality and the health – of our now multi-cultural inheritance and contemporary cultural experiences.

The way we have placed such high costs on humanities and arts students in higher education has continued to narrow the significance of these disciplines, which contain all the sciences – all of STEM – within them. We are not educating enough potential pre-tertiary – particularly secondary – teachers and the subsidising of private schools has made everything harder for our public system. And that dichotomy has been here in the attitudes about who belong in which disciplines, as if knowledge can be divided into what is male [‘hard’] and what is female [‘soft’]. Descartes made no such gendered distinction in ‘Cogito ergo sum’.

We cannot have a thriving national culture in this 21st century unless we get rid of that artificial binary in our approach to education – and our lives. It is like saying that health is separate from education, or the physical is separate from our mental life.

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Conclusion

The public good, for so many decades, has been decried – as if private-for-profit and ‘market solutions’ were the only way forward. Moreover, the line between true ‘markets’ and publicly subsidised ‘monopolies’ is becoming increasingly blurred and dangerous.

The public good – with the imagination, innovation and inventiveness that goes with it, because community groups always have to find ways around the insufficiency of funds, the sense of community, the awareness and conservation of our environment, the possibilities when the sciences are seen working within the Arts and Humanities, with the civic institutions funded properly – must be brought to the centre of our thinking.

Only in this way will Australia have a national cultural policy in which we share an identity based on the value of collective human engagement in all that is worthwhile, one which is not, as it frighteningly appears now, increasingly undermined by politically-promoted division.

Special evidence. The best example of the *interconnectedness* essential for a worthwhile national cultural policy is in a recent publication. *The Enigmatic Echidna*, by Danielle Clode – zoologist, fine writer and outstanding science communicator, whose book is praised by James Bradley – has a poem at the beginning. ‘Echidna’ by Mike Ladd opens with ‘Before’, preceding the section of the book ‘Carved in Stone’ and a poem by Les Murray speaks to ‘Now’ on page 109. Les Murray is known to all interested in Australian literature and Mike Ladd, a recognised Australian poet, ran ‘Poetica’ on ABC RN for years. He now helps to open up the history of this continent. Science and poetry complement one another in this book, which Peter Goërs describes as a future South Australian classic. Danielle Clode (born 1968) is an Australian author of literary nonfiction, history and children's books. She is an associate professor of creative writing at Flinders University.

Please give due regard to this submission, in spite of its length.

Erica Jolly

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Author of ‘*Challenging the Divide: Approaches to Science and Poetry*’ Lythrum Press, Adelaide 2010, launched by Robyn Williams of the ‘Science Show’ in the State Library of South Australia with contributions, among others, from Nobel Prize Laureate Professor Peter Doherty, immunologist, and Nobel Prize Laureate Professor Roald Hoffmann quantum chemist, poet and playwright of Cornell University and Professor Jocelyn Bell Burnell who should have had a Nobel Prize for her discoveries in astronomy.