

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

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Pluralism over cohesion and censorship

In recent years Australia's arts and cultural organisations have absorbed a new expectation from government: that their first responsibility is to maintain the status quo. The current National Cultural Policy operates against an emerging norm in which 'social cohesion' is cited by funders, ministers and boards as a basis for altering programs, withdrawing commissions, and restricting artistic and cultural work.

The term has no definition in policy documents or the charters of these organisations, nor indeed does it appear in the Creative Australia Act 2023. While there is no formal or agreed upon definition, in practice it has come to mean the absence of visible public dissent. The meaning of 'cohesion' has functioned as consensus, conformity and coercion.

A running tally puts the number of Australian arts and cultural bodies accused of censoring, disciplining or otherwise harming their own artists at 66 between 2023 and 2026. The pattern has unfolded throughout the life of Revive, much of it driven by the very Premiers, Ministers and statutory authorities whose policies are meant to protect creative work. While the stated purpose has been to manage risk, the documented outcome has typically been the opposite: prolonged controversy, reputational damage, withdrawal of artists and partners, and amplification of contested content. By trying to manage controversy through suppression, funders and organisations amplify every risk they hoped to avoid.

The next Policy must recognise why free expression in the arts is a public good. Regarding controversies, one may note that arts events are organised settings which are moderated, programmed and shaped by professionals, which makes them an unusually disciplined place for difficult subjects to be aired. What gets said in those settings is owned by named visible people, so there is considerable accountability. Furthermore, there are moments when political leaders are too constrained or too divided to host a public conversation - in those moments artists can carry it on in their place. Finally, artists bring a different kind of attention to public questions than politicians, academics or activists do; their work offers something that political argument rarely does, which is shared experience across disagreement.

A culture that treats every difficult work as a threat to be managed will lose the capacity to examine itself. The prioritisation of incoherent definitions of 'social cohesion' over organisational purpose, artistic freedom and basic human rights must be stopped, reversed and its damage repaired. The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly enshrine artistic freedom and freedom of expression as foundational commitments across all five pillars; prohibit the use of 'social cohesion' as a funding or programming criterion in arms-length cultural bodies; and require funders and cultural organisations to publish their reasoning whenever a work is altered, withdrawn or deselected, with independent recourse available to affected artists.