

TOWARDS A NEW NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY –

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH AUSTRALIANS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH COUNTRY

A submission informed by more than two decades of engagement with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' cultural, governance, language, and knowledge systems; the Wet Tropics and Far North Queensland region; and the region's creative sector and creatives

From nearly five decades of lived experience as one of Australia's First Nations peoples operating at the interfaces between Indigenous and mainstream systems within multicultural Australia – including across governance, policy, cultural heritage, research, community development, and outcomes-focused work – I have come to the view that creative expression emerges from culture, and culture emerges from relationships, especially relationships with Country, kinship, memory, language, and place.

This is a deeper proposition than standard and westernised “arts and culture” policy framing. It suggests that the creative sector should not be understood only as a producer of artistic outputs, but also as a contributor to cultural development, belonging, continuity, stewardship, and collective identity.

For Australia's First Nations peoples, these relationships are ancient, continuous, collective, and grounded in Country, law, language, and custodianship. However, this understanding should not be seen as exclusive to First Nations peoples alone. All Australians, including migrant and newly arrived communities, should be encouraged to develop meaningful relationships with the Country, ecology, histories, and cultural life of the places in which they live. The creative sector can play an important role in supporting that process of cultural development.

At the same time, cultural knowledge used within cultural development frameworks should be recognised as collectively-held cultural inheritance, not simply as open creative source material. For many First Nations peoples, cultural knowledge is embedded within Traditional Custodian group governance systems connected to Country, kinship, language, and law. Its use therefore requires the group collective's authorisation, cultural authentication, and ongoing governance by the appropriate custodial groups. Policy and funding systems should also recognise that where cultural knowledge generates creative, institutional, educational, tourism, or economic value, benefits should flow back to and strengthen the collective group custodians of that knowledge.

Accordingly, I am arguing that Australia's future cultural policy should move beyond supporting isolated artistic outputs and instead support cultural development systems grounded in:

- Country and place,
- language and memory,
- custodianship and collective governance,
- intergenerational transmission,
- participation and belonging,
- and culturally grounded creative expression.

That would represent a substantial repositioning of Australian cultural policy.

Suggested policy propositions across the Revive Pillars

Australia's future cultural policy should move beyond the institutional framing of "arts and culture" and instead support *cultural development through the creative sector*.

Creative expression does not emerge in isolation. Art in all its forms emerges from culture, identity, memory, language, story, and relationships with Country and place.

Creatives, all people, and cultural development contribute to the quadruple bottom line of caring for Country, social equity, cultural vitality, and economic prosperity providing equitable benefits for all.

The creative sector therefore has a vital role not only in producing artistic works, but in strengthening cultural belonging, intergenerational connection, ecological awareness, social cohesion, and place-based identity.

The following propositions are offered in that context.

Pillar 1 - Australia's First Nations First

Recognising and respecting the crucial place of Australia's First Nations stories at the centre of the nation's cultural life

1. Recognise Australia's First Nations culture as Country-based governance systems

- Australia's First Nations cultures should not be understood only as creative expression or heritage. They are also governance, law, ecological knowledge, language, and intergenerational responsibility grounded in Country.
- National cultural policy should recognise Traditional Custodian groups, language nations, and native title structures as foundational cultural governance systems.
- This is perhaps the most significant change and progressive development the new National Cultural Policy can make.

2. Recognise language as living cultural infrastructure

- Language is not simply a communication tool or archival object. Languages are living knowledge systems, a relationship to Country, and a framework for cultural continuity.
- Policy should support Australia's First Nations languages revitalisation; Traditional Custodian group authorised, Indigenous-controlled collections; digital systems; and intergenerational transmission.

3. Support Indigenous-controlled cultural systems

- Policy should prioritise Traditional Custodian group-authorised and controlled databases, keeping places, archives, cultural mapping, and on-Country cultural capability.
- This includes recognising Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights of the collective Traditional Custodian group.

4. Support biogeocultural approaches

- For many Australia's First Nations peoples, culture is inseparable from water, biodiversity, story, ecology, and landscape.
- Cultural policy should support integrated biogeocultural approaches linking culture, environment, tourism, education, and stewardship.
- These biogeocultural approaches can align with regional ecosystem frameworks such as the IBRA, NVIS and or NEASA systems.

Pillar 2 - A Place for Every Story

Reflecting the breadth of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as creators of culture

1. Support place-based cultural development

- National policy should strengthen regional and local cultural ecosystems, recognising that culture develops through relationships with place, local participation, and community connection.
- This includes stronger support for regional intermediary organisations such as Arts Nexus.

2. Encourage cultural connection to Country for all Australians

- All Australians, including migrant communities, should be encouraged to develop meaningful relationships with local Country, ecology, history, and place-based cultural life.
- The creative sector can play a key role in supporting belonging, participation, and mutual understanding.

3. Recognise cultural rebuilding as cultural work

- Many Australia's First Nations language nation and Traditional Custodian groups are rebuilding language systems, archives, governance structures, and cultural transmission pathways.
- Policy should recognise cultural rebuilding itself as a core form of cultural development and is of mutual benefit for all Australians.

4. Support culturally authorised storytelling and interpretation

- Policy should support Traditional Custodian group-led storytelling across tourism, digital media, education, public interpretation, and cultural experiences.

Pillar 3 - Centrality of the Artist

Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators

1. Recognise cultural labour as skilled professional work

- Creative and cultural work includes cultural research, language work, knowledge verification by the collective group, archival work, mentoring, governance, and community accountability.
- These forms of labour should be recognised and properly remunerated.

2. Create long-term cultural career pathways

- Policy should support stable employment pathways, regional cultural leadership, vocational development, and intergenerational mentoring.
- The sector should move beyond reliance on short-term project funding.

3. Strengthen ICIP and digital cultural protections

As digital systems and AI expand, policy should strengthen, for the Traditional Custodian group collective -

- Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protections
- authority over cultural materials,
- and safeguards against unauthorised extraction and reproduction.

4. Recognise artists and cultural practitioners as contributors to broader social systems

- Creative and cultural practitioners contribute to tourism, education, environmental stewardship, health and wellbeing, and regional resilience.
- Policy should recognise these broader contributions, authorised through the respective Traditional Custodian group collective.

Pillar 4 - Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain Australia's cultural life

1. Expand the meaning of cultural infrastructure

- Cultural infrastructure should include digital systems, language databases, keeping places, cultural landscapes, and Indigenous governance systems, not only major buildings and institutions.

2. Strengthen regional cultural ecosystems

- Regional organisations such as Arts Nexus (<https://www.artsnexus.com.au/>) play important roles in:
 - connecting practitioners
 - developing partnerships
 - strengthening local participation,
 - and supporting regional creativity.
- These intermediary organisations require stable, long-term support.

3. Align collecting institutions with Traditional Custodian group systems

- National collecting institutions should proactively notify Traditional Custodian groups about holdings, support digital return into regionalised keeping places (which could be database collections), enable correction and re-authorisation, and work with Indigenous metadata standards and governance systems.

4. Support integrated cross-sector infrastructure

- Cultural systems increasingly intersect with tourism, environmental management, education, archives, and digital systems.
- Policy should encourage integrated approaches rather than siloed sector funding.

Pillar 5 - Engaging the Audience

Making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad

1. Support culturally authentic and place-based storytelling

- Audiences increasingly seek authentic, locally grounded, and culturally authorised experiences.
- Policy should prioritise Traditional Custodian group-led interpretation and storytelling.

2. Improve discoverability of regional and Australia's First Nations cultural content

- Large amounts of regional and Australia's First Nations cultural content remain difficult to discover.
- Policy should support digital discoverability, Indigenous-led metadata systems, and regional cultural promotion pathways.

3. Strengthen participation through local cultural ecosystems

- Cultural participation is strongest where local organisations, schools, festivals, libraries, artists, and communities operate together as interconnected cultural ecosystems.

4. Recognise culture as social and ecological infrastructure

- Culture contributes to belonging, resilience, reconciliation, ecological awareness, and social cohesion.
- Cultural policy should recognise culture not as an optional add-on, but as essential national infrastructure.

Cross-cutting proposition

Across all five pillars, Australia's next National Cultural Policy should shift from supporting isolated artistic outputs, toward supporting long-term cultural development systems grounded in Country, place, language, custodianship, participation, and relationships.

The creative sector should not simply produce content. It should help all Australians connect to place, understand one another, strengthen cultural continuity, and participate meaningfully in the shared cultural life of the nation.