

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public and anonymous

Individual



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

As an artist and creative practitioner, I am deeply concerned about the independence of Australian contemporary artists and the sector's ability to uphold freedom of expression without fear of political interference.

Increasingly, as an artist working in Australia's cultural institutions and arts organisations I feel increasingly vulnerable to pressure from political actors and well-funded lobby groups whose interests do not necessarily align with Australia's democratic sustainability and this nations' world-renowned artistic freedom.

The Federal Government's response, through the Minister for the Arts, to the complaints raised by Senator Claire Chandler regarding the appointment of Lebanese-Australian artist Khaled Sabsabi and curator Michael Dagostino to represent Australia at the 2026 Venice Biennale demonstrated a troubling failure of arms-length cultural policy. The rapid reversal of the original selection, followed by the public rejection of the selected team, appeared reactive, uninformed, and dismissive of an 'armslength,' rigorous and independent selection process. The eventual reinstatement of the selected team only reinforced concerns that political pressure had been allowed to override basic principles of artistic independence and procedural integrity.

The controversy also exposed broader issues within Australia's cultural landscape: the persistence of racism, anti-immigrant/anti-refugee sentiment, and Islamophobia directed toward artists from culturally diverse backgrounds.

The media campaign surrounding Khaled Sabsabi's appointment demonstrated how quickly artists can become targets of political self-interest and racial profiling despite assurances that Australian artists have access to freedom of expression. A modern democratic society must ensure that artists are free to participate fully in public and cultural life without fear of racism, public denigration and reputational or professional harm.

I believe the National Cultural Policy for Australian artists must protect decolonial work, anti-racism, and anti-discrimination. Artists must be able to speak freely, sign open letters, engage in protest or boycott actions, and participate in civic debate without risking their livelihoods or exclusion from government funded institutions.

The arts sector should not instrumentalise artists for political propaganda, nor should artists be reduced to mouthpieces for governments, lobbyists, or media sensationalism.

Freedom of speech, artistic expression, and protection from political interference must be foundational principles. The strength of a democratic society depends on its willingness to protect thoughtfully uncomfortable voices, cultural diversity, and creative risk-taking.

At the same time, the long-term health of the creative sector requires structural support. In an increasingly precarious and AI-driven future, Australia must safeguard artists' rights through strong copyright protections and royalties, secure housing, and a guaranteed basic income for practising artists. Supporting artistic freedom also means ensuring artists have the basic living conditions to continue creating, contributing, and challenging society. A rigorous, dynamic, and culturally thriving democracy depends on real commitment and investment in artists.