

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

SUBMISSION ON THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

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FREEDOM OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Freedom of expression in the arts must be guaranteed. The arts give voice to every aspect of the human experience. This does not exclude the political. You cannot take Guernica out of Picasso's oeuvre, or war out of War and Peace. You cannot have The Merchant of Venice without Portia's speech, or The Odyssey without the siege of Troy.

The greatest shame the cultural sector has experienced is the recent attempt to silence voices opposed to genocide and war crimes. The most egregious examples involve ministerial interference, and have brought disgrace on Australia. I refer first to the removal of Khaled Sabsabi from Venice Biennale representation, the reversal of which, under pressure from the arts community, has not removed the stain from Australia's record; and second, to the cancellation of Dr Randa Abdel-Fatteh's appearance at Adelaide Writers' Week, leading to a boycott by authors, the cancellation of the 2026 event and the resignation of the event's distinguished Jewish director.

These are only two examples of interference in the arts. Throughout the cultural sector there is now an atmosphere of intimidation and penalisation of people speaking out against genocide, or simply representing Palestinian, Arab or Muslim voices. This is damaging to both creativity and social cohesion.

The National Cultural Policy must put in place measures to prevent the recurrence of such discrimination.

FUNDING AND GOVERNANCE

The mission of public cultural institutions is to raise the cultural level of the society they serve, through excellence in museum collections and artistic performance.

This requires two things of government: to provide funding based on the long-term cultural needs of society, rather than narrow, short-term budgetary constraints; and to ensure that appointments to governing bodies are of people with a commitment to foster excellence in their institutions.

At present the board appointment system in Australia is broken. Too often appointments are made on a political basis as a reward to party donors or corporate leaders with whom a given government is doing business.

The idea that big business leaders know how to manage cultural institutions is profoundly mistaken. New South Wales provides the clearest examples. The Trust of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, dominated by business, embarked on a vanity project, Sydney Modern, which diverted benefaction from the collection to construction, creating what is largely a function centre, based on a secret business plan so unrealistic that it has plunged the Gallery into financial crisis, forced redundancies and undermined scholarship and programming. Meanwhile the Board of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences proved incapable of resisting plans by successive Liberal and Labor governments to demolish the Ultimo Powerhouse, Australia's finest museum of science and technology, and disperse its collection.

Corporate models of shifting focus from cultural values to commercial revenue-making are failing. Allow the pursuit of excellent, and benefaction, public support and volunteer engagement will follow.