

Submission to National Cultural Policy : May 2026

Wantok Musik Foundation is an Australian not-for-profit arts organisation and independent music label with over 30 years of experience working alongside First Nations Australian and Indo-Pacific communities to preserve, celebrate and amplify music, language and cultural knowledge.

We are both a record label and a cultural organisation, and that combination is intentional. It means we understand the full arc of the work, the deep cultural relationships required to do it with integrity, the artistic rigour needed to produce outcomes of genuine quality, and the operational capacity to deliver in complex Pacific environments. We have produced more than 60 recordings and toured artists to WOMADelaide, WOMEX, the Sydney Opera House, and across Europe, India and the Pacific.

Our community and cultural programs have taken us to Timor-Leste, Bougainville, Manus Island, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga and alongside First Nation Australia; recording and archiving at-risk cultural knowledge, mentoring women in creative leadership, supporting artists whose voices deserve a global platform, and building the kind of long-term, trust-based relationships that short-cycle project funding cannot achieve.

In 2025, Wantok Musik Foundation received the Asia Pacific Arts Award: Inspire, and our Artistic Director Dr David Bridie was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Deakin University for his contribution to the peoples of the Pacific through music, film and cross-cultural partnership. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to Australia's next National Cultural Policy. We do so with a conviction built from three decades of practice: a national cultural policy worthy of this country must look outward as well as inward, toward the Pacific, toward our neighbours, and toward the role Australia can and should play in our region.

A Nation defined by its region

The five pillars of Revive reflect important values and real achievements. We support their continuation. But we write to make a case that remains insufficiently addressed in the existing framework.

Australia is a Pacific nation. That is a geographic and historical fact. The cultures, peoples and communities of Oceania are not distant others toward whom Australia has diplomatic obligations. They are our neighbours, with whom we share ocean, weather, trade, migration and an entangled future being reshaped, urgently, by climate change.

This proximity carries both privilege and responsibility. Australia has the institutional capacity, creative infrastructure and international reach that most Pacific nations do not. How we use that, whether as a genuine cultural partner or as a one-directional exporter of Australian stories and values defines what kind of nation we are in the region.

A cultural policy that speaks only to what happens within Australia's borders misses rich opportunity. The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly recognise that Australia's cultural relationships and responsibilities extend into the Pacific. This is not foreign policy, it is cultural policy, properly understood and valued.

No other country is positioned to do this, no other nation combines Australia's proximity to Oceania with its institutional capacity, creative excellence and the depth of people-to-people relationships that organisations like Wantok Musik have spent decades building. This is a rare national asset, and we believe the next policy should treat it as one.

Stories that belong here

The breadth of Australian stories must include the Pacific in all its dimensions. We address three distinct groups, each with their own claim on recognition.

Indo-Pacific artists and cultural practitioners are sovereign creative communities whose work deserves support within Australian cultural policy in its own right, not as an extension of domestic First Nations policy – that must remain distinctly Australian - not as subjects of aid programming, and not as a diplomatic instrument. They are neighbours and creative partners. The women knowledge-holders, elders and community storytellers Wantok works with across our region do not have ABNs or acquittal histories. What they have is cultural authority and living knowledge that is being lost at pace. Current policy has no meaningful pathway for them, and it should.

Australia is also home to a significant and growing Pacific diaspora, communities with deep ties to Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and beyond. Wantok Musik has worked with artists from these communities to support music releases, tours and cultural presentations. These stories are also Australian stories; they connect young people with their elders; they keep diaspora communities rooted in their heritage. These stories belong in this policy, and they belong on Australian stages.

And there is a cultural emergency that must be named – climate change. In Bougainville and the Carteret Islands, in Tuvalu and Kiribati, Pacific communities are living through climate displacement now. The songs tied to place, the dances anchored to seasonal cycles, the oral histories that trace how communities came to occupy their land, the women whose storytelling holds the memory of their communities, all of this is at risk when the land itself is altered or lost. Climate change is not a future threat for these communities, it is a present reality, and the cultural losses it is driving remain almost entirely invisible within international climate discourse.

This work is urgent, and it requires sustained policy support and dedicated funding not ad hoc project grants that begin and end on a government timeline while the sea keeps rising.

From project to career

Artists are the irreplaceable foundation of everything this policy seeks to achieve and that principle must extend through the full arc of a career, not just the participation phase of a project.

Through our community programs, Wantok regularly identifies and works with extraordinary artists. We record with them, we see their capability clearly, and then too often there are minimal resources to take the next step. Grant funding supports participation and delivery, but it does not often cover what it costs to release and tour an international record. It does not often resource long-term mentoring. This is the gap between project and career, and it is where many Pacific artists are lost not through lack of talent, but through lack of sustained support

What it requires is investment in the label infrastructure that makes the next step possible, studio time, international distribution, promotion, touring pathways, mentoring, and the significant and largely unrecognised administrative burden of international travel for artists from Pacific Island nations.

Women artists, elders and community knowledge-holders face additional and compounding barriers. Women in the Pacific face high rates of gender-based violence, economic marginalisation and cultural constraints on public voice, and yet women are frequently the primary custodians of cultural knowledge: the singers of ancestral songs, the tellers of origin stories, the holders of ceremonial knowledge. Investing in women's creative leadership is not solely a gender equity intervention. It is a cultural preservation strategy, an economic development pathway and a community wellbeing program simultaneously.

Wantok's *Pacific Women Lead* program and *Feto nia Lian, Feto nia Istória* in Timor-Leste demonstrate what this looks like in practice. Sixteen participants produced twenty original songs in November 2025, drawing on oral histories shared by Elders. The young women who learned sound engineering in that program are now mentoring others. Australian cultural policy should actively support this kind of work explicitly and structurally, with opportunities other than through competitive project rounds that communities in Dili or Honiara cannot realistically access.

Cultural is infrastructure

When songs are lost, language loss follows closely after. Similarly, when storytelling is interrupted, so too are the knowledge systems that have enabled communities to navigate disruption across generations. When women's voices are silenced, which happens in every society under pressure, communities lose half their creative and leadership capacity. The infrastructure that preserves and transmits cultural knowledge is as foundational as roads or telecommunications, and it is being allowed to degrade.

Archiving is where the urgency is sharpest. Across the Pacific and First Nations Australia, knowledge holders are ageing. Languages with little or no written form exist predominately in the memories of Elders in their seventies and eighties. Urbanisation, digital saturation, AI and economic pressure are drawing younger generations away from the communities and Elders whose knowledge they might otherwise inherit. The window for preserving much of this material is measured not in decades but in years.

Archiving done well is not simply recording, it requires cultural permission, community governance, ethical frameworks for access and use, training of local custodians, and institutional partnerships that ensure material remains accessible to the communities it belongs to and not captured in foreign collections that communities cannot reach. Wantok works in partnership with PARADISEC to ensure long-term access and stewardship, with artists and communities retaining all intellectual property and control of their archives. As a nation with the resources and infrastructure to support this work Australia has an ethical obligation to ensure no knowledge is lost.

Our Solomon Islands Na Ainamae na Totoraha project led by Wantok artists and Elders [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] reflects this in practice: a community-designed initiative preserving the ancestral songs, chants, dances and knowledge systems of the 'Are'are and Lau peoples of Malaita, at a point where modernisation is placing these cultural forms under direct pressure. This is exactly the kind of project Australian cultural policy should be actively enabling. Currently it depends on fragile, short-cycle grant funding that cannot sustain the long-term relationships this work requires.

We recommend:

- Dedicated and sustained investment in digital archiving and cultural preservation infrastructure for Pacific and Melanesian communities, with community governance and digital repatriation built into the framework from the outset.
- Direct, structural support for Pacific civil society organisations, particularly those supporting women's creative leadership, environmental knowledge documentation and community cultural governance through Australian cultural policy, not solely through development aid channels

Exchange not export

The Pacific is not a foreign market into which Australian culture is or should be exported. It is a region of living cultures, creative communities and audiences with whom Australia has the opportunity and the responsibility to engage as genuine partners.

The model Wantok practises is one of reciprocity. We do not take Australian culture to the Pacific, rather we facilitate exchange bringing Pacific voices, knowledge and artistry into conversation with Australian creative practice, and creating work that belongs to both. This produces richer artistic outcomes, stronger community relationships and more durable cultural impact than any one-directional program could achieve. It also builds the kind of trust and goodwill that no diplomatic initiative, however well-resourced, can manufacture.

Our Six Asks

Based on over three decades of practice, we ask the government for the following in the next National Cultural Policy:

1. State clearly that Australian cultural policy has a Pacific dimension. Culture does not stop at our borders. The next policy should include an explicit, standalone commitment to Australia's cultural relationships and responsibilities in Oceania, not buried in a foreign policy annexe, but at the heart of the framework.

2. Establish a dedicated Pacific cultural engagement program. Drawing on the model of the British Council and Goethe Institute, Australia should create a properly resourced program focused on Oceania, one that funds genuine, reciprocal artistic exchange rather than one-directional cultural promotion, co-designed with Pacific partners, not designed for them.

3. Fund women's creative leadership in the Pacific as a structural priority. Women in the Pacific are simultaneously the most marginalised and the most culturally significant creative voices in many communities. Australian cultural policy should fund women's creative leadership programs in the Pacific not as a gender equity add-on, but as a core cultural preservation and community development strategy.

4. Fund Pacific cultural archiving as urgent national infrastructure. Climate displacement and the ageing of knowledge holders are destroying irreplaceable cultural knowledge now. The documentation, archiving and digital repatriation of endangered Pacific cultures should be treated as a national cultural priority with dedicated long-term funding and community governance built in, not dependent on annual project rounds.

5. Include Pacific voices in the national story. Pacific artists and the Pacific diaspora communities living in Australia are part of Australia's cultural story. The next policy should explicitly name Pacific voices as a priority, with dedicated funding pathways through organisations that have genuine community relationships on the ground.

6. Close the gap between project and career for Pacific artists. Grant funding supports participation but does not build careers. Australian cultural policy should invest in the label and career development infrastructure that enables Pacific artists to move from project participant to internationally active artist, covering recording, distribution, promotion, touring, mentoring and the significant administrative burden of international travel.

Final word

The songs not recorded now may not exist in ten years. The women whose leadership is not supported today will be lost to the pipeline. The communities facing climate displacement need partners who understand that culture is not peripheral to what must be sustained - it is central.

Wantok Musik has spent more than three decades demonstrating what it looks like when Australia shows up in the Pacific as a genuine cultural neighbour. We are curious, present, reciprocal, and willing to listen more than we speak. The relationships we have built, the artists we have worked with, the archives we have helped create and the careers we have helped launch are evidence that this is not only possible but transformative.

No other country is positioned to lead this work. Australia has the proximity, the relationships, the creative sector and now the policy moment. The next National Cultural Policy should claim that position with confidence and back it with the structural commitment it deserves.

