

24 May 2026

The Hon Tony Burke MP

Minister for the Arts
Office for the Arts

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications
and the Arts

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY REVIEW 2026

About the Submitter

Ian Milliss is an artist, writer and cultural activist widely recognised as a pivotal figure in the development of conceptual, political and interdisciplinary art in Australia. Beginning his career in the late 1960s as the youngest member of the Central Street Gallery group in Sydney, Milliss exhibited at major commercial and public institutions from the age of sixteen, including Watters Gallery, Bonython Gallery, Ray Hughes Gallery and the National Gallery of Victoria. His landmark 1973 essay 'New Artist?', commissioned by the NGV for the Object and Idea exhibition, helped define Australian post-conceptualism.

Milliss went on to become a central figure in the Builders Labourers Federation green bans movement, co-founded the Artworkers Union, and helped establish the framework for the Australia Council's Art & Working Life program. Through Union Media Services he worked with over fifty unions. In recent decades he has continued to exhibit - at Manly Art Gallery and Museum, Penrith Regional Gallery, Wollongong Art Gallery, Macquarie University Art Gallery, ACCA Melbourne, the Art Gallery of NSW, Monash University Museum of Art, Artspace Woolloomooloo, Deakin University Art Gallery, van Abbemuseum Netherlands and beyond - and to publish widely on Australian art history, cultural policy and the politics of the arts. He has never received a personal grant from Creative Australia or its predecessor, the Australia Council.

Introduction

This submission responds to the National Cultural Policy consultation with two distinct but interconnected arguments.

The first concerns censorship, political interference and racism in the arts. It draws on principles fundamental to the nature of art itself - that creative expression is by definition a mechanism of cultural adaptation and social evolution, and therefore must remain free from restriction.

The second concerns the structural reform of arts funding in Australia, arguing for the replacement of the current project-grant model with a Basic Income for Artists, as

successfully piloted and now made permanent in Ireland.

Both arguments share a common foundation: that artists cannot fulfil their essential social function - generating the new ideas, perspectives and ways of being that allow human communities to adapt and survive - if they are economically precarious, politically silenced or institutionally punished for their speech.

Part One: Against Censorship, Political Interference and Racism in the Arts

Art as Cultural Adaptation: Why Censorship Is Always Wrong

Art is not decoration. It is not entertainment provided at the pleasure of governments, donors or media proprietors. Art is, at its deepest level, the primary mechanism through which human societies adapt culturally - the process by which communities generate new ways of perceiving, interpreting and acting in a world that is always changing.

This understanding has deep roots in both philosophy and evolutionary biology. Human cultures survive not through rigid adherence to inherited norms but through the capacity to generate novelty, to imagine alternatives, to rehearse possibilities before committing to them. Art is the cultural domain where that generative, exploratory work happens most freely and most powerfully. Every great shift in how human societies understand justice, identity, nature, technology or each other has been prefigured and enabled by art: by images, stories, performances and objects that made the previously unthinkable thinkable.

It follows from this that censorship is not merely an aesthetic or political harm - it is a structural threat to the adaptive capacity of human societies. When art is censored, when certain ideas are declared unspeakable, when certain artists are punished for the territory their work explores, a society cuts off precisely the neural pathways through which cultural evolution travels. It becomes less capable of responding to the challenges it faces.

This is why every conceivable subject must remain open to artistic exploration and public discussion. There are no topics that are inherently too dangerous, too offensive or too destabilising to be addressed in art. There are only societies more or less capable of tolerating the discomfort that genuine cultural adaptation requires. A society that censors art does not protect itself. It weakens itself.

The current crisis in Australian arts policy is a case study in exactly this kind of self-inflicted damage. When Creative Australia cancelled its commission to Khaled Sabsabi and Michael Dagostino for the 2026 Venice Biennale - capitulating within six days of the announcement to political pressure, media hostility and a ministerial phone call - it did not protect the arts community from controversy. It demonstrated that Australian artists with the "wrong" politics, background or subject matter cannot rely on their publicly funded institutions to defend them. The chilling effect on every artist who witnessed that betrayal was immeasurable and is ongoing.

Commitment to egalitarian values

The National Cultural Policy must take a genuinely decolonial, anti-racist and anti-discrimination approach, taking its leadership from those already working within such frameworks in the sector.

The flawed IHRA definition of antisemitism must be removed from all arts, cultural and educational institutions. In its place, institutions should adopt the UN Core

Stance of Values: that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, without distinction of any kind, including race or ethnic origin. A racist definition of antisemitism that has been weaponised to silence Palestinian voices and those who oppose apartheid and genocide has no place in publicly funded cultural institutions committed to human rights.

Artists as the Moral Compass of the Sector

The National Cultural Policy must affirm and protect the role of artists as ethical and values-driven leaders. Concretely, this means:

- Artists must be free to speak publicly, sign open letters and participate in boycott actions without risk to their funding, reputation or institutional relationships.
- Arts and cultural institutions must respect cultural diversity and actively champion artists who have been targeted in the media or politically for speaking out against injustices.
- Artists must not be instrumentalised by institutions, lobbyists, media organisations or politicians.
- The policy must address the prevalence of censorship and cancellation of artists who speak out, particularly regarding nations condemned by the UN for acts of apartheid, genocide and war crimes.

Freedom from Political Interference

The arms-length principle is not an optional nicety. It is the foundation on which publicly funded arts institutions derive their legitimacy. Its breach in the Sabsabi case - documented, admitted and ultimately corrected only after mass community protest - demands a structural response, not a communications review. The National Cultural Policy must:

- Implement an independent inquiry into political interference in the arts, including through ministerial communication with agencies, donor influence, and board appointments.
- Prohibit politicians at all levels from influencing funding decisions, as already required by the Creative Australia Act (s.14.2), and establish enforceable accountability mechanisms when this occurs.
- Remove board members with active connections to political parties or lobbying organisations and if necessary enforce accountability mechanisms against them.
- Prohibit donors from influencing programming or personnel decisions at arts organisations and if necessary enforce accountability mechanisms against them.
- Uphold and enforce the Creative Australia Act (s.11.e) commitment to promote freedom of expression in the arts as a non-negotiable condition of public funding.

Part Two: Toward a Basic Income for Artists in Australia - Learning from Ireland

The structural failures of the current Creative Australia project-grant model - chronic underfunding, competitive atomisation, vast “unfunded excellence”, enormous unpaid labour in application processes, and extreme economic precarity for independent artists - cannot be addressed through incremental reform.

I call on this consultation to commit to investigating and piloting a Basic Income for Artists in Australia, modelled on Ireland's landmark scheme, as a transformative replacement for and complement to existing project-based funding mechanisms.

I note that I have previously spoken to the Minister on this issue, written on this question for Rochford Street Review and elsewhere, and that a similar call has been made by Greens arts policy and by researchers including Dr Jo Caust. This is not a fringe position. It is the direction the evidence points.

The Irish Model: Proven Results

Between 2022 and 2025, the Irish government ran a Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) pilot paying approximately 2,000 artists €325 (approximately AU\$545) per week - an unconditional, regular income, subject to tax. Eligibility required proof of professional practice and Irish residency, with no income means test. Visual artists, theatre-makers, writers, musicians, dancers, filmmakers and others were all included. Selection was by open, anonymised random ballot from eligible applicants.

Independent evaluations published in September 2025 found:

- Recipients spent nearly eight additional hours per week on their creative practice and produced 40% more Irish artworks.
- Artists who received the basic income were more than twice as likely to remain in their artistic careers compared to those in the control group.
- Recipients experienced a 20% reduction in enforced deprivation and significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression.
- The pilot generated over €100 million in social and economic benefits, including €80 million from improved mental wellbeing and €16.9 million in social value from audience engagement.
- Every €1 of public investment returned €1.39 to society - through tax revenue on payments, increased artistic output, reduced welfare dependency and healthcare cost savings.

So successful were these outcomes that the Irish government made the scheme permanent from 2026 - one of the only basic income pilots in the world to survive beyond its pilot phase into enduring policy.

Why Australia Needs This Now

Australia's arts sector contributes \$112 billion annually to the economy and employs over 600,000 people. Yet federal arts spending under the Revive program stands at just \$25 million for 2025–27 - below pre-2013 levels. Project-based grants concentrate support in large established organisations, demand extensive unpaid labour in application processes, reward existing networks over emerging and marginalised voices, and lock independent artists into permanent cycles of precarity.

This precarity is not politically neutral. Artists who are economically dependent on institutional goodwill cannot afford to speak freely. The same artists most likely to address the difficult subjects - colonialism, racism, political violence, structural inequality - are the most likely to be punished for doing so under a project-grant system where funding bodies bend to political and donor pressure. A Basic Income, unconditional and independent of project content, would provide the material foundation for genuine artistic freedom.

Recommendations

The National Cultural Policy should commit to:

- Commissioning an immediate feasibility study and pilot design for an Australian Basic Income for Artists, drawing directly on Ireland's methodology, eligibility framework and evaluation approach.
- Piloting a scheme paying a minimum of AU\$545 per week to at least 3,000 artists across disciplines and regions, selected by open, non-competitive, anonymised random ballot from eligible professional artists.
- Funding the pilot through redirected and increased arts investment, including reduction of administrative overhead in the current grant bureaucracy.
- Designing the scheme as genuinely unbiased, there must be no restriction on First Nations artists, artists from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, or cultural forms or media that have been historically marginalised by the project grant system.
- Ensuring the income is unconditional and politically insulated - not subject to withdrawal based on artistic content, political speech or media pressure.
- Running the pilot alongside an independent evaluation with a control group, as Ireland did, to generate Australian-specific evidence for permanent policy.

Conclusion

Both arguments in this submission flow from the same principle: that art is a form of work essential to the health and adaptive capacity of human society, and that artists must be materially supported and politically protected in order to do it.

A National Cultural Policy that fails to address censorship, political interference and racism in the arts - and that fails to move beyond the structural inadequacy of project-based grant funding - is not a cultural policy. It is a management document for a sector in managed decline.

Australia has the evidence, the economic base and the moral obligation to do better. I urge this consultation to recommend long needed bold, structural change: a genuinely arms-length, censorship-resistant cultural policy and a Basic Income for Artists that gives every Australian artist the foundation they need to do their most important work.

Ian Milliss

Artist and Writer

██████, NSW