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Submission for Australia's National Cultural Policy

by Fernando Gros

Australia is in the midst of the debate about social cohesion. Online, in mainstream media, and at the polls we see evidence of the fragmentation of the body politic. We can understand some of the reasons for this. Like Australia's growing economic inequality. Our ever rising cost of living. And the way Australia seems pushed around in the current geopolitical situation.

These are economic and geo-political issues. Yet the arts can contribute to shaping how Australians respond to them. Because the arts shape the national discourse. The arts can enhance Australia's diplomatic efforts. And the arts can bolster Australia's economy.

I.

The arts enhance our public discourse. Books, records, and films, shape our culture. As do performances, festivals and exhibition spaces. The arts provide the space for the exploration and understanding of identity. They give voice to human experience allowing people to feel heard. And helping explain the society around us. The arts and the cultural products they create can help connect people to the places they live. These imaginings encourage interacting with our collective memory. The conversations they generate can yield the respectful open exchange of ideas. And this enhances the evolution of civil society.

It is this civil society that that's under threat in Australia now. By civil society I mean the part of society that is neither government or big business. This is of course where most Australians live their lives.

Our nation aspires to be a democratic civil society. Compulsory voting means we celebrate the value of every voice every time we cast our ballots. We deepen our democratic civil aspirations by respecting and understanding all voices.

We don't get there by cancelling festivals, censoring voices, or pushing publications out of existence. We can't build a strong society on fear. We can't be ready for the future if we want to shut down our creativity.

We need our government, with its historic mandate, to be bold in supporting a vision for the arts that enhances a democratic civil society. This vision needs to not be timid. It must include the broadest range possible of Australian voices. It needs the strength to be open to the public discourse we need to support this openness. There needs to be a truthfulness about consequences of failing to support a democratic vision of the arts. What this could mean for Australia if we succumb to the forces that want to continue to concentrate our media ownership.

Those interests that wish to regulate opinion. To limit us to the status quo. Or strip-mine our intellectual property to further enrich foreign technological interests. And those interests that wish to make our populace anxious and resentful about their place in the world.

II.

Soft power is a way in which countries can exert international and diplomatic influence beyond the hard power diplomatic tools of trade and military might. Soft power is especially important for smaller and middle powers that lack the negotiating force of the largest countries. Soft power helps support the image of a country as being creative, innovative, and worthy of attention. A country like Australia, which can benefit from international students, tourism, and drawing the best and brightest from around the world to our cutting edge medical and tech facilities, is a prime example of where soft power actions could be beneficial.

But, having lived in several global cities (London, Tokyo, Delhi, Hong Kong, Singapore), I have seen first-hand that our high commissions and foreign missions lag behind the efforts of other countries. They do little to dispel the perception that Australia is a racist, sport obsessed country with little more to offer than beaches and a casual attitude to life. Other missions have packed programs of performances, work hard to get their films in festivals, constantly tour authors and musicians, and promote their arts working nationals who live in foreign lands as cultural ambassadors.

Confident countries exert soft power effortlessly. Australia's inconsistent efforts at soft power over the last 25 years reflect a national anxiety over what we stand for as a country.

Our national arts policy must look beyond only supporting the arts domestically. It should project a strong, vibrant, and attractive vision of Australia. Not spin. Not advertising. But a

tangible taste of what makes us unique. And also makes us trustworthy as a partner on the global stage.

III.

The arts are a major employer in Australia and a significant part of our economy. Other submissions will surely highlight that in more detail than I can. But I want to point to two areas of this economic contribution that seldom get mentioned. The role of arts education in the broader well-being of workers. And the way the arts help the health of society as a whole.

As people live longer and approach their careers in more generative and satisfying ways the arts offers itself as an option to enhance their lives and support their desire to be more creative and innovative in their work. Many arts workers also have educational roles where they share their skills and approach to life with people who are not employed in the arts who just want to enhance their lives or express themselves creatively. These educational experiences can give people confidence to express themselves and come with creative solution at work in other parts of their lives.

Moreover, the making and consumption of the arts has a proven benefit for people's mental well-being and their ability to recover from illness and disease. Our cultural policy should reflect the way the arts can contribute to the well-being at various stages of life where there is a need to recover from trauma, illness, injury or the many issues that face people as they age.

IV.

Having surveyed these three issues I offer up these proposals for the new National Cultural Policy.

First, the arts and culture should be of central importance to healing the civil rifts we see and enhancing the democratic character of the body politic. To do this it needs to be broad, open, and truthful.

Second, Australia needs a much more ambitious approach to global soft power initiatives, and our arts and culture are central to making this possible.

Third, the arts and cultural work have a substantial economic benefit for Australia. Not just for the artists themselves, or the ones who sell, the work, but also for all workers and citizens who benefit from an enhanced quality of life.

Australia's arts policy should be as ambitious as the dreams Australians have for a better life at home and a bigger voice on the world stage.