

John Maynard

In November this year, I will deliver writer-director S. Shakthidharan's first feature film, *The Laugh of Lakshmi*.

I am a film producer, distributor, and director at Felix Media. I was awarded the Cecil Holmes Memorial Award by the Australian Directors Guild (2005) and an Honorary Master of Arts by the Australian Film Television and Radio School (2003). My filmography can be found here: <https://www.felixmedia.com.au/john-maynard>

A Submission on the Next National Cultural Policy: An Opportunity Foretold

Arts policies represent a form of institutional memory, a willingness to be held to account over time, an ambition that deserves to be taken seriously.

This submission takes it seriously enough to state plainly that the current National Cultural Policy is not, as claimed, “*a forward-looking framework that will shape how we support and celebrate arts and culture over the coming years.*” It is built on a false picture of the country. The consultation paper misrepresents who Australians are, what their cultural lives look like, and what a policy adequate to those lives would need to do. These are not quibbles. They go to the foundations.

Being brushed aside by a member of the Policy Advisory Group, suggesting that a Marxist cultural analyst’s view might be useful in raising questions about the very nature of what they were struggling with, hasn’t stopped me from quoting Marx without raising eyebrows:

Groucho Marx resigned from the Friars Club of Beverly Hills with a telegram: “I don’t want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member.” The joke contains a structural insight. The Australian cultural policy advisory system has inverted it. This is a club that accepts only people exactly like its existing members. The rest were never invited to resign. They were never invited at all.

The People the Policy Ignores

More than half of Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent who was. Australia is the first English-speaking nation to cross that threshold. The consultation paper does not mention this once. Not as context. Not as a complication. Not as opportunity. Not at all.

This is not an omission. It is a position.

In Sydney’s west, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lebanese, and Pacific Islander communities lead rich cultural lives — self-funded, community-organised, and invisible to every institution on the Policy Advisory Group. In Melbourne’s north, Greek, Turkish, and Somali associations have sustained cultural programs for generations without government recognition. These are not marginal communities awaiting inclusion. They are the majority. The policy is written around them, not for them.

The median age of the combined advisory cohort is approximately 49–51. The youngest members are 33. No one under 30 sits on either the Policy Advisory Group or any of the five Expert Panels advising Australia’s next National Cultural Policy.

Gen Z — the generation that constitutes the primary audience for live music, digital arts, and festival culture; the generation that uses TikTok as a search engine and Bandcamp as a distribution model; the generation that will live longest with the policy decisions being made here — is unrepresented.

The five pillars were designed in 2022 and carried forward unchanged. Their implicit model — First Nations as foundation, Anglo-Celtic culture as default, diverse communities as enriching texture — was demographically false then. Retaining it in 2026 is not inertia. It is a decision about who counts, made by people who have never had to ask the question.

The Map the Policy Doesn't Have

The geographic omissions are not incidental. They are the policy.

Australia is a vast country administered, in cultural terms, from three cities. Canberra writes the policy. Sydney and Melbourne receive it. Everything else is, in the language of the bureaucracy, 'regional and remote' — a single category that flattens Broken Hill and Broome, Longreach and Lismore, the Kimberley and the Channel Country into a generalised elsewhere that the policy acknowledges in passing and addresses never.

Consider what is missing from the Advisory Group's composition.

Adelaide, where the festival infrastructure is among the most significant in the country, and the screen and live performance sectors have built genuine capacity over decades, is not represented.

Brisbane, the fastest-growing capital in Australia, with a cultural sector reshaped by the 2032 Olympic commitment and a First Nations artistic community of national significance — yet not represented.

Perth, geographically closer to Djakarta than to Sydney, operates a cultural economy that functions largely in isolation from the eastern seaboard networks that wrote this policy — not represented.

Hobart, where MONA has done more to redefine Australian art collections in a generation than any Commonwealth program, and where the island's particular relationship to convict history, colonial legacy, and Palawa culture demands specific attention — not represented.

These are not small places. They are state capitals with functioning arts sectors, universities, galleries, theatres, orchestras and communities that submitted to this process in good faith. Their absence from the Advisory Group is not an administrative oversight. It is a demonstration of where, in the mental geography of the policy class, Australia ends.

Darwin does not appear in the Advisory Group's composition. Nor does Cairns. Nor does any city or town west of the Divide where the cultural infrastructure does not exist, where the nearest major gallery is a plane ticket away, where the nearest film set has never been. The Location Offset benefits productions that film in places like this only when those places serve as a backdrop. When the crew leaves, nothing remains. No skills transfer. No institution built. The landscape used; the community passed through.

Tasmania requires a paragraph of its own. The island is not remote in the continental sense, but it is persistently treated as peripheral. Its Aboriginal heritage — among the

most complex and contested in Australia, given the particular history of dispossession and the survival of Palawa culture against official denial — receives no specific acknowledgement. The Tasmanian cultural economy is small, geographically bounded, and operating without the scale benefits available to mainland capitals. A national cultural policy that does not account for this is not a national cultural policy. It is a policy for the mainland.

In remote First Nations communities, the picture is not 'regional disadvantage'. It is something categorically different. In Arnhem Land, in the Western Desert, in Cape York, culture is not an industry. It is the organising principle of existence. Language, ceremony, kinship, country — these are not heritage assets to be preserved in a museum. They are living systems of governance, law, and meaning

This is the sharpest edge of the geographic failure. The communities most directly affected by the failure of cultural policy are the ones least equipped to participate in the process designed to address it. That is not oversight. That is the design.

The Advisory Group: A Club Consulting Itself

Every member of the Policy Advisory Group is based in Sydney or Melbourne. Six lead organisations that are direct creatures of government arts funding. None represents regional Australia. None carries the heritage of China, India, Vietnam, the Philippines, or Lebanon — the communities that now constitute Australian plurality. In the last three years, Indian cinema has had more attendance than Australian cinema. Go figure.

Look at the list more carefully. Screen Australia. Creative Australia. The major performing arts organisations. The peak bodies. All of them are creatures of the same funding architecture that the policy is meant to review. They have a material interest in the outcome. They also wrote the framework within which submissions are invited. This is not a conflict of interest managed at the margins. It is the operating principle.

A group constituted in this way will produce a policy that serves the institutions its members lead, in the cities where they live, for the audiences they already know. This is not cynicism. It is institutional logic operating exactly as designed. The Policy Advisory Group is not a deliberative body. It is a ratification mechanism with good intentions and a consultation schedule.

The consultation advisors are drawn from the same postcodes, the same alumni networks, the same grant-making and grant-receiving circuits that have governed Australian cultural policy for thirty years. The same conversations, restaged with new PowerPoint slides. The same conclusions, dressed in the language of the moment. When the minister announced a fresh public conversation, he meant it. The advisors are not fresh. They are the conversation's longest-standing participants — the ones who have shaped every previous answer and been rewarded for doing so.

None of this is personal. These are capable people who care about culture. The problem is structural. When you appoint people whose careers have been built within a system to design the next iteration of that system, the next iteration will resemble the current one. The differences will be at the edges. The architecture will remain untouched.

Sydney's screen sector makes the point physically. Screen Australia, Screen NSW, Create NSW, Creative Australia, AFTRS — same postcodes. The writers', directors', and

producers' guilds — same cab ride. The broadcasters, the streamers — same precinct. Institutions that share postcodes share assumptions, networks, and definitions of what culture is and who makes it. Proximity has become a monopoly. The five pillars do not challenge this. They were designed by it.

A further problem with the consultation advisors: they were not chosen to represent a view. They were chosen to lend authority to a process. The word diversity is mentioned 43 times. Their presence signals legitimacy. Their actual deliberations are internal, undisclosed, and not subject to external scrutiny. We are asked to trust the process because we trust the names attached to it. This is the logic of the credentialled class applied to public governance: deference substituted for accountability.

Five Pillars, One Premise

The consultation paper opens with a number: \$67.4 billion. Culture is measured as an industry. Everything that follows flows from this.

First Nations First. The pillar closest to asserting intrinsic cultural value — survival, sovereignty, intergenerational transmission — is still written in the vocabulary of industry: careers, income, economic sustainability. What was, in the traditions of the Quandamooka or the Bundjalung, a practice of cosmological and juridical significance becomes product. First Nations artists become workers. First Nations knowledge becomes cultural heritage assets. The pillar claims to centre First Nations culture. It is structured by the assumption that First Nations culture must justify itself in economic terms. This is not emancipation. It is domestication with a welcome statement attached.

A Place for Every Story. The language of inclusion masks a highly selective infrastructure. The stories that get told are the ones that can attract development funding, find a broadcaster, and move through the existing institutional pipeline. The pillar promises every story. The machinery delivers the familiar ones, told by the familiar people, for the familiar audiences. The promise of universality is the oldest device of the particular.

Centrality of the Artist. The professional artist as economic unit — career-building, income-earning, industry-participating. What cannot be measured as a career does not register as art. The amateur, the community practitioner, the diaspora elder transmitting irreplaceable knowledge that has no industry equivalent: structurally invisible, and intended to be. The pillar is not about art. It is about the labour market for art. These are different things.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure. Buildings, institutions, major organisations. In cinema, the Location Offset serves hundred-million-dollar Hollywood productions while pricing Australian independents out of the facilities built ostensibly for them. Netflix, Amazon, Disney: the primary beneficiaries of infrastructure investment, with no loyalty to Australia and no obligation to stay when a better offer arrives elsewhere. The infrastructure is real. Its scale ensures it works for those who need it the least.

Engaging the Audience. Culture as product. Australians as consumers. The relationship between community and cultural practice — as participants, makers, transmitters — does not appear. Audience metrics replace cultural meaning. The Cantonese opera group rehearsing Saturday mornings in a hired hall generates no audience data, no box office return, no cultural GDP. It therefore does not exist as a policy object. That it may be the most culturally significant thing happening in its postcode on any given Saturday is a question the framework is not equipped to ask.

Taken together, the five pillars describe not a vision of culture as the expression of human capacities, but an industry that should be properly funded, inclusive in its workforce, and measured for its economic outputs. The policy does not ask what culture is for. It asks what culture produces. These are not the same question, and one of them has been quietly dropped.

What the Policy Cannot See

Food carries memory. Language carries culture. Community practice carries people through displacement, grief, and the slow erosion of belonging. None of it appears in cultural GDP. None is named in the five pillars.

The community language school system — Saturday mornings, volunteer teachers, hired halls, no government recognition — is the most significant institution of cultural transmission for millions of Australians. When Vietnamese-Australians lose Vietnamese, they lose a literary and musical tradition. When fourth-generation Greek-Australians lose Greek, they lose Homer, an inheritance that no amount of arts funding can reconstruct. The policy does not register this as loss. It does not register it at all. A framework built to count cannot mourn what it never counted.

And in the remote communities the policy cannot reach, the loss is happening now, at pace, in the languages that have no equivalent and leave no substitute.

The Verdict: An Opportunity Foretold

The consultation runs seven weeks, in easy-read format, within a fixed framework designed by the people most invested in its conclusions. It is not designed to challenge. It is designed to generate legitimacy for decisions already made. A closed system consulting itself and calling the result public deliberation.

It reads like politicians' talking points.

This is what advisory groups do when they are not required to explain their composition. This is what consultation produces when the framework is set before the public is invited to speak. The submissions go in. The policy comes out largely as planned. The gap between them is called the process.

The Cantonese opera group in Haymarket. The Vietnamese language school in Springvale. The Hazara cultural association in Melbourne. The Filipino rondalla in Perth. The Yolngu ceremonial life of east Arnhem Land. The Warlpiri singers of Lajamanu. The Palawa cultural organisations of Lutruwita. The Kurdish community theatre of Adelaide. The Pacific Islander churches of Logan. Not funded. Not consulted. Not represented. Not seen.

They are, nonetheless, Australia. Groucho understood that the club defines itself by who it excludes. This policy's advisory group has not yet understood this. That is a gap to be closed by reforming the expert panels.

John Maynard, 24 May 2026