

National Cultural Policy 2026 Personal Submission

To whom it may concern,

Thank you for inviting submissions.

The organisation I lead has already made a submission, however I am making a personal submission as someone who has worked in major collecting institutions for over 25 years, and also run music and youth arts festivals, run underground club nights, founded a nationally distributed print and online music magazine, and designed and built interactive digital products and services, often working with the latest technologies of the time. I have spent most of my life engaged with different scales of creative practice both hyperlocal and international, both for purpose and for profit - and I am interested in living in a society that fully values and recognises the vital forward momentum of culture and creativity and the international exchanges that it enables.

Many other submissions will focus on what specific actions the next iteration of the National Cultural Policy should take; others will argue for the inclusion of other artforms and subsectors of the cultural industries that have been previously excluded; others will argue about who needs to be included as creators and welcomed as audiences; and others will argue for a broader understanding of the positive impacts of a thriving artistic, creative and cultural landscape in Australia.

I support all of these efforts to expand these definitions, outcomes, and proposals for action - many of which will have come from organisations that I have been involved with or from individuals in my networks.

However, I would like to spend my short personal submission to strongly recommend that the new National Cultural Policy *opens* with a clear, and well argued, multi-dimensional rationale for *why* public money *must* be spent supporting culture, arts and creative practices. And why this expenditure is generative, protective, and vital at a time of global uncertainty and the breakdown of global norms and longstanding alliances.

This cannot be a defensive statement. A society which cannot represent itself to itself, make stories about its own life, argue about its own history, and imagine its own future, is not fully a society. Do we wish to live together in a nation or a market? Will we be citizens of a self-governing community that maintains the shared imaginative resources necessary for self-governance, or merely consumers in a territory where those resources have been outsourced to whoever can produce them most cheaply at global scale? Unlike underfunded infrastructure, which declines slowly and can be restored, a defunded creative ecosystem dissolves completely. We have already witnessed the devastation to the creative industries from the COVID-19 pandemic where we saw many artists and creative workers swiftly migrate into other careers, other countries, and other possibilities. What Australia is deciding now is not how much it wants to spend on culture, but whether it wants a culture at all, or whether it is content to consume the cultural production of larger, wealthier, or more culturally confident nations.

As we have learned from the reception of the recent Federal Budget and research into Civics Awareness in the Australian population at large, the Australian public has been starved of the time and opportunity to understand the complexity of how governments make choices to fund and support some activities over others, some parts of the economy over others, and invest in R&D both directly and indirectly. This disengagement is common as modern societies have become more complex and interdependent - and causal relationships between actions and outcomes are less easily defined or evident.

The last 40 years of economic policies have narrowed the way in which we conceive and measure the 'effectiveness' of what may have previously been considered 'public goods'. When the 'effectiveness' of culture is reduced to 'economic value' or 'economic impacts', this ignores the reality that the economic value is captured most effectively by adjacent industries and sectors. A thriving 'cultural capital' will still have artists and creators, musicians and game makers, writers and craftspeople, struggling to pay their rent, and museums, galleries, and theatres battling from grant to grant, while hoteliers and tourism businesses and property investors are more successfully able to 'capture' the economic value created by those artists and creators.

The aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of governments in providing direct financial support for a range of businesses and citizens have also transformed the expectations of the scale of government support. The reactive, clickbait nature of the modern media economy has shrunk the time and space for the public to engage properly with complex policy decisions - this is what culture-war politics has done to cultural policy in every country where these tactics have been deployed.

The opening statements of the new national cultural policy need to directly answer the question of why public money must be spent supporting culture, arts and creative practices, in a way that makes sense to the non-participant, those who feel excluded, and to those who are convinced that there is no choice but austerity. Any culture that survives a funding withdrawal is going to be a culture of those wealthy enough to fund it privately or through philanthropy. And the culture produced by global platforms is simply optimised for 'engagement', not truth. The stories of suburban Australia, regional Australia, migrant Australia, Indigenous Australia, young Australia require public investment to exist at all. Indeed, Australia's cultural diversity is precisely what distinguishes it internationally. A genuine popular culture is not market-produced and not solely philanthropically-funded but requires public investment in the conditions for communities to produce their own cultural lives. The choice should not be between funding culture and saving money, but between a culture that belongs to *all* Australians and a culture that belongs to a handful of shareholders.

The opening statements of the new national cultural policy need to answer the question of public funding in a way that clearly explains how Australia's population and geography require us to use public money to underwrite certain types of risk at certain moments in history. Australia is uniquely vulnerable to cultural colonisation with a comparatively small population, English-speaking, geographically remote from the dominant cultural producers of the

Anglophone world, with a specific history and environmental relationship that requires active, funded cultural production to maintain a distinct national identity.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Australia wasted years neglecting to build lasting connections with our closest neighbours in Asia, and those relationships will now take years to develop in a much more fractured world. Without public investment in Australian stories, Australian voices, and Australian institutions, the cultural landscape will be filled by American and British content through the simple logic of market scale. This is a structural vulnerability, not a theoretical risk. Public investment in Australian culture is not a subsidy for the arts, it is an act of national self-determination. It is the decision that Australian children will grow up in a culture that knows where they live, understands their history, and speaks in voices that sound like their own.

The opening statements of the new national cultural policy need to state clearly that a population that understands itself primarily through imported cultural narratives is a population whose political imagination is shaped by foreign priorities, foreign social conditions, and foreign historical experiences. Cultural sovereignty is not a luxury but a precondition for a functioning, self-determining democracy, of the kind that Australia has spent decades building and defending.

At a time when democracy is threatened, we have extensive evidence of what happens to communities when their cultural infrastructure collapses. They become more isolated, more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, more hostile to institutions, and less capable of the kind of collective action that modern governance requires. Cultural investment is not a luxury we fund when we can afford it. It is preventive social infrastructure that makes every other public investment more likely to work. A democracy which cannot think clearly about itself, which has outsourced its self-understanding to foreign platforms and imported narratives, is one that cannot mount a coherent collective response to external threats.

It turns out that a good cultural policy is also likely to be the best national defence policy.

