



THE OFFICE OF AUSTRALIA'S SPECIAL ENVOY TO COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA

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Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
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Sports and the Arts
[REDACTED]

Re: Submission to the Public Consultation on the New National Cultural Policy

The Office of the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia (OSECI) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the public consultation paper for a new National Cultural Policy. OSECI was established on 14 October 2024 following the Prime Minister's appointment of Mr Aftab Malik as Special Envoy.

OSECI and the Special Envoy are independent of government and seek to assist and advise on combating Islamophobia, social cohesion factors, promoting public awareness and understanding of the impact of Islamophobia and supporting efforts to address systemic, interpersonal racism and hate. The Special Envoy's mandate is to advocate for policies that both protect Muslim Australians and challenge structural and institutional inequalities.

On 12 September 2025 the Special Envoy delivered to the Prime Minister the report *A National Response to Islamophobia*, containing 54 recommendations and identifies Islamophobia as “*not only interpersonal ... [but] also institutional and structural.*” This submission builds on and operationalises that work.

This submission advances thirteen recommendations, organised under the five pillars established by *Revive*, alongside a cross-cutting category.



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1. Reinforce, not dilute, First Nations First
2. Operationalise Recommendation 50 of A National Response to Islamophobia
3. National Muslim Creative Industries Fund
4. Embed representation thresholds in major Commonwealth funding agreements
5. National Artistic Freedom and Contractual Integrity Principles
6. Strengthen Cultural Governance and Institutional Independence
7. National Review of Multicultural Heritage Representation
8. Establish a Community Cultural Infrastructure Fund
9. Develop a National Cultural Diplomacy and International Creative Exchange Strategy
10. Establish Audience Equity and Growth Corridor Participation Targets
11. National Cultural Safety and Inclusion Standards
12. National Cultural Sector Anti-Racism and Equity Framework
13. National Cultural Equity Advisory Panel and Sector Monitoring Program

The next National Cultural Policy should ensure that all communities can participate fully in Australia's cultural life as equal contributors and leaders, while also fostering culturally safe environments that uphold dignity, inclusion, and freedom from discrimination.

Observations on the framing of this consultation

OSECI offers three observations on the structure of the consultation paper:

- i. *The consultation paper is framed in continuity, not in failure:* The prompts under each pillar are uniformly affirmative. The paper does not ask what *Revive* did not achieve, what publicly-funded institutions have failed at, or what the next policy should stop doing. A consultation that cannot name what has gone wrong inside the institutions it funds will not produce a structural response to it.
- ii. *Cultural institutions and their governance are absent from the framework:* Pillar 4 addresses the institutions that sustain Australian arts and culture, but the consultation does not invite reflection on board insulation from external pressure, on content-vetting standards, on procedural fairness owed to commissioned artists, or on transparency when programming decisions are rescinded. The next policy should articulate a position on institutional governance and accountability.
- iii. *The vocabulary of cohesion is doing too much work:* The consultation paper's working vocabulary throughout is belonging, connection, shared experience, participation. That describes one of the functions of public cultural investment, not all of them. Culture is not only a source of social cohesion; it is also a space where competing identities, histories and ideas are negotiated. The next policy must recognise both dimensions.



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Submission to the Public Consultation on the New National Cultural Policy

Artistic Freedom, Cultural Safety and the Structural Participation of Muslim Australians

Executive Summary

This submission argues that Australia's next National Cultural Policy must move beyond representation as a diversity objective and move towards cultural democracy as a nation-building project. More than half of Australians are either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, while younger generations are growing up in communities that are more culturally and religiously diverse than at any point in Australian history. Australia is entering a period of profound social, demographic, technological and cultural transformation. These shifts present extraordinary opportunities for creativity, innovation and cultural exchange. They also raise important questions about belonging, participation, representation and power.

Cultural policy can no longer be understood solely as a framework for supporting artists, funding institutions or preserving heritage. Rather, it must be recognised as a central mechanism through which Australia negotiates questions of identity, citizenship, memory, democracy and social cohesion. The stories that are funded, the histories that are preserved, the artists who are supported and the institutions that are empowered collectively shape how Australians understand themselves and one another.

While Muslim Australians have become indispensable contributors to Australia's cultural life, significant structural barriers continue to limit participation, sustainability, leadership and cultural expression. Muslim artists, writers, performers, curators, educators, filmmakers, musicians and cultural organisations play an increasingly important role in shaping contemporary Australian culture. They have expanded artistic practice, introduced new forms of storytelling, fostered intercultural dialogue and contributed significantly to Australia's creative industries. Yet these contributions often occur despite structural constraints rather than because of supportive cultural and material policy settings.



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These barriers include:

- a) chronic underinvestment in Muslim cultural infrastructure;
- b) limited representation in cultural leadership and governance, including on Boards;
- c) insecure organisational funding and overreliance on project-based grants;
- d) experiences of Islamophobia, racism and cultural exclusion;
- e) uneven access to major institutions and decision-making processes;
- f) limited archival and heritage preservation initiatives;
- g) absence of dedicated creative development pathways;
- h) increasing pressure to depoliticise or sanitise Muslim artistic expression;
- i) a lack of long-term investment in community-led cultural organisations; and
- j) inadequate recognition of Muslim cultural production as a permanent and valuable component of Australia's cultural landscape.

The experiences of Muslim Australians provide a particularly useful lens through which to examine broader structural weaknesses within Australia's cultural ecosystem. They reveal how participation is shaped not only by access to funding but also by questions of legitimacy, belonging, institutional trust and public recognition.

This submission highlights that culture should be understood as critical national infrastructure. Just as governments invest in roads, schools, hospitals and digital connectivity, they must also invest in the cultural infrastructure that enables communities to create, preserve and transmit meaning across generations. Culture shapes how communities understand themselves, how they relate to one another and how they participate in the national project.

A key challenge confronting Australia is that multicultural representation has not always translated into cultural power. Over recent decades, considerable progress has been made in increasing the visibility of diverse communities within Australian cultural life. Diverse artists are more visible on stages, screens and festival programs. Public institutions increasingly acknowledge multicultural audiences. Diversity strategies have become commonplace across cultural organisations.

However, visibility alone is insufficient. The result is a cultural ecosystem that often celebrates diversity while leaving underlying power structures largely unchanged. Many culturally diverse communities continue to report feeling included in cultural narratives while remaining excluded from cultural decision-making. Representation often occurs at the level of participation rather than governance. Communities may be invited to contribute stories but not to shape institutional



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priorities. They may be celebrated as audiences but not empowered as leaders. They may be consulted as stakeholders but not recognised as partners.

This distinction between representation and decision-making is critical. A genuinely democratic cultural system is not one in which communities are merely visible. It is one in which they possess the resources, institutions, leadership opportunities and decision-making authority necessary to shape their own cultural futures.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore embrace a broader vision of cultural democracy. It must redistribute cultural opportunity, strengthen community ownership and ensure that diverse communities are able to participate fully in cultural production, preservation and governance. This approach requires investment not only in artists but also in cultural ecosystems. It requires support for:

- i. community cultural organisations;
- ii. festivals and events;
- iii. archives and heritage projects;
- iv. creative hubs and cultural centres;
- v. and pathways into institutional leadership.

This submission highlights the importance of addressing cultural exclusion and discrimination as cultural policy issues. Experiences of racism, Islamophobia and other forms of exclusion affect whether communities feel safe participating in cultural institutions and public life. When communities perceive institutions as culturally unsafe or unresponsive, participation declines, trust erodes and opportunities for intercultural engagement are diminished.

Addressing these challenges requires more than symbolic commitments to inclusion. It requires practical investment in cultural safety, institutional accountability and equitable participation. The future policy should therefore establish clear mechanisms to strengthen representation, improve governance, support community-led initiatives and ensure that publicly funded institutions reflect the diversity of contemporary Australia.

The next National Cultural Policy therefore presents an opportunity not simply to support the arts, but to strengthen democracy itself.



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Part 1: The evidence base

1.1 The Muslim Australian creative sector

Muslim Australians comprise an estimated 800,000 to 900,000 people, approximately 3.2 per cent of the Australian population.¹ The community is among the most ethnically, linguistically and theologically diverse in Australia.

The Muslim Australian creative sector is correspondingly diverse, active across literature and publishing, screen, music, visual arts, architecture and design, fashion, food culture, comedy, theatre, spoken word, digital storytelling, community arts, youth arts and interdisciplinary practice, and at every scale from internationally-touring artists to community-led festival programming. Policy responses framed around the assumption of a small or homogeneous sector will be inadequate and ineffective.

1.2 The structural conditions of participation

The barriers facing Muslim Australian artists, cultural workers and organisations are not primarily matters of individual prejudice or isolated incidents. Rather, they reflect broader structural conditions that shape who is able to participate in Australia's cultural life, under what terms, and with what degree of autonomy. There are three recurring patterns that capture the experiences of Muslim Australian creatives in age of heightened securitisation: the treatment of Muslim creative expression as a category of heightened institutional risk, the experience of cultural unsafety within publicly funded institutions, and a persistent disconnect between representation and decision-making power. Taken together, these conditions produce a cultural environment in which Muslim participation is frequently contingent, creative autonomy is constrained, and access to leadership, commissioning and curatorial authority remains disproportionately limited.

- *Institutional risk-aversion and political scrutiny:* Muslim Australian creative work is treated by funding bodies, venues, festivals and broadcasters as a category of cultural production carrying elevated political and reputational risk. The result is a pattern of content modification, deferral, cancellation, (in)formal vetting of artists' personal and political views including views on Palestine, and the substitution of Islamic devotional content with secularised alternatives. Muslim creative participation is, in practice,

¹Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing, Religious affiliation data: <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>. Islam was recorded as the religious affiliation of 3.2 per cent of the Australian population at the 2021 Census.



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conditional on political acceptability and institutional comfort. This Office uses the term *conditional acceptance* for this dynamic. It is the central operating problem the next policy must address.

- *Cultural unsafety in publicly-funded institutions:* Practitioners and audiences consistently describe major civic and cultural institutions as culturally unsafe: differential treatment by security personnel; institutional silence in response to anti-Muslim incidents; absence of Muslim Australian leadership at senior staff and board level; and a generalised institutional culture not constructed to support Muslim Australian participation. This is the conceptual ground addressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety frameworks in health and education, and is the basis for Recommendation 15.
- *Hypervisibility and invisibility:* Muslim Australians are simultaneously hypervisible, as subjects of cultural production controlled by others, and invisible, as creators appearing in major collections, on major stages and in major publications at rates below population share. The structural response is the distinction between visibility and creative control: who writes, directs, curates, commissions, programs and acquires. Recommendation 4 engages this distinction directly.

1.3 The cultural-sector pattern

The experiences documented in the following case studies are not presented as isolated incidents, interpersonal disputes or organisational misunderstandings. Rather, they reveal deeper structural tensions within Australia's cultural landscape and expose the limits of existing policy frameworks that continue to equate diversity with inclusion.

While Australia's cultural institutions have become increasingly comfortable celebrating diversity as a public value, they remain far less equipped to navigate cultural expression that is politically contested, challenges dominant narratives or emerges from communities positioned at the margins of public legitimacy. The result is a growing gap between institutional commitments to diversity and the lived experiences of many artists, cultural workers and community organisations.

The following case studies offer important lessons for policymakers. The cases that follow illustrate recurring patterns across different institutions, jurisdictions and cultural settings. They reveal how cultural participation can be constrained not only through formal censorship but through more diffuse mechanisms of risk management, reputational anxiety, governance failures and external political pressure. Importantly, they raise broader questions about who is permitted to participate in Australia's cultural life without qualification, whose stories are considered politically acceptable, and which communities are afforded institutional protection when controversy emerges. They also highlight the unequal distribution of cultural risk.



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Taken together, these examples suggest that the greatest challenge facing Australia's cultural sector is not a lack of diversity, but the absence of sufficiently robust cultural infrastructure capable of protecting artistic freedom, supporting contested expression and ensuring equitable treatment across communities. They reveal a cultural ecosystem in which inclusion is often conditional, recognition remains uneven and institutional responses can be shaped more by political pressure than by transparent principles.

These cases should be understood as diagnostic rather than exceptional. They expose structural vulnerabilities within Australia's cultural governance architecture and demonstrate why future cultural policy must move beyond questions of representation alone.

Case Study 1: SalamFest and the civic venue pattern in Victoria

SalamFest is a Melbourne-based Muslim arts festival, established in 2016 to activate some of Melbourne's most prominent civic venues (Federation Square, Queen Victoria Market, the Library at the Dock, Broadmeadows Town Hall).²

Despite its continued success, SalamFest have raised concerns around a consistent pattern of conduct: substitution of religious content (one high-profile event requiring the adhan be substituted with Sufi melodic music, and Qur'anic recitation with broader Abrahamic scripture), pre-programming content vetting, the reported blacklisting of named artists, and a notable Islamophobic incident at a Victoria Market event involving venue security staff and a Palestinian artist.

SalamFest's experiences illustrate a pattern of barriers and challenges that community led arts is experiencing.

²SalamFest: <https://salamfest.com>. The matters referenced in this case study were raised in structured engagement with the Office of the Special Envoy in early 2026 and are at varying stages of independent verification.



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Case Study 2: Abdul Abdullah: a Muslim Australian artist's career as a record of Islamophobia

Abdul Abdullah is a seventh-generation Australian Muslim visual artist of Anglo-Malay heritage and a five-time Archibald Prize finalist.

Abdullah's career documents the experience of Islamophobia as a recurring condition of cultural production in Australia rather than a single incident. The post-9/11 environment was formative: his early memories include witnessing a stranger tear his mother's hijab from her head in public. In 2014 he produced *Siege*, a body of work explicitly addressing the psychological condition of having “to constantly defend himself and his beliefs in response to the rise of Islamophobia.” In 2015, his work *Entertainers*, a portrait of a balaclava-clad figure with facial features assembled from popular musicians, was publicly framed by *The West Australian* newspaper as promoting terrorism, at a moment when Abdullah was a finalist in major Australian exhibitions.³ He has spoken on the public record about the regularity of hate mail, two-hour airport security holds, and the precarious political space a Muslim Australian artist occupies even when collected by the national collecting institutions.

The significance of this case is twofold. First, it establishes that Islamophobia is not an episodic crisis for Muslim Australian artists but the operating condition of their public creative practice. Second, it demonstrates that the Islamophobic targeting of a Muslim Australian creative whose work makes Muslim identity its subject matter operates independently of any Middle East political context: the mechanism is name-based suspicion, post-9/11 racialised stereotyping, and conservative-media targeting of art works that ask Australians to confront their own assumptions.

³ On the public reception of Abdullah's 2015 work *Entertainers*, including *The West Australian*'s characterisation of the work as promoting terrorism, see Ocula Magazine artist profile: <https://ocula.com/artists/abdul-abdullah/>. On Abdullah's documented account of post-9/11 Islamophobia experienced as a Muslim Australian artist, including the memory of a stranger tearing his mother's hijab and his airport security experience, see VICE Australia, “*Abdul Abdullah Talks About His Art, Australia, and Being the Bad Guy*”, 2015: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/abdul-abdullah-talks-about-his-art-australia-and-being-the-bad-guy/>.



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Part 2: Response to the five pillars

Australia's next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to address a longstanding contradiction within the nation's cultural landscape. While multiculturalism has become a defining feature of contemporary Australia, cultural infrastructure, institutional investment and decision-making authority have not evolved at the same pace as the country's demographic transformation.

The five pillars' success will depend on whether they are translated into practical mechanisms that address structural inequalities within Australia's cultural ecosystem. Without dedicated investment, accountability measures and community-led infrastructure, there is a risk that diversity remains an aspiration rather than a lived reality.

This submission therefore approaches the five pillars through the lens of cultural democracy. Cultural democracy extends beyond representation and access. It recognises that communities require the resources, institutions and authority necessary to create, preserve and transmit their own cultural traditions while contributing to the broader national story. It asks not only who is visible within culture, but who holds decision-making authority within cultural systems.

The recommendations that follow are designed to strengthen the Government's vision by ensuring that Muslim Australians—and by extension other culturally diverse communities—can participate in Australia's cultural future not simply as audiences or contributors, but as institution-builders, cultural custodians and equal partners in shaping the nation's creative and cultural life. The proposals are intended not as special measures for one community, but as investments in a more democratic, representative and resilient cultural ecosystem for all Australians.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

The principle underpinning Pillar 1 is foundational to the integrity of Australia's cultural future. The recognition that First Nations peoples are the original custodians of this continent, and that First Nations cultures, knowledge systems, languages and artistic traditions must be resourced, protected and led by First Nations peoples themselves, is not simply a matter of historical acknowledgment. It is a recognition of sovereignty, cultural authority and the right of



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communities to determine how their cultures are preserved, expressed and transmitted across generations.

This principle has broader significance for Australia's cultural landscape. It establishes an important precedent for how cultural policy should engage with all communities: that cultural representation must be accompanied by cultural agency; that participation must be accompanied by decision-making power; and that communities themselves must remain the primary custodians of their histories, heritage and cultural futures.

A genuinely inclusive cultural policy begins by recognising that the future of Australian culture must be built upon the leadership, knowledge and self-determination of First Nations peoples. Strengthening that foundation strengthens the cultural sector as a whole. For Muslim Australians, support for Pillar 1 is therefore a recognition that cultural justice is indivisible. A cultural sector capable of respecting First Nations self-determination is better equipped to recognise the cultural rights, histories and contributions of all communities that now call Australia home.

Recommendation 1: Reinforce, not dilute, First Nations First

The next policy should retain First Nations First as the lead pillar. First Nations Arts should be resourced to support, where requested, cultural projects involving Muslim Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and engagement with the pre-colonial Makassan–Yolŋu cultural relationship.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Muslim Australians have contributed profoundly to the nation's cultural, artistic, literary, intellectual and media landscapes. These contributions span generations and encompass writers, artists, filmmakers, performers, musicians, journalists, educators, curators and community cultural institutions. Yet despite this growing body of work, Muslim Australian cultural production continues to occupy an uncertain position within the national cultural imagination, frequently celebrated as an expression of diversity, but less consistently supported as an enduring and integral part of Australia's cultural heritage.

Recommendation 50 of *A National Response to Islamophobia* recognised this challenge and called for the active affirmation of Muslim Australian contributions to arts, culture and media. The next National Cultural Policy provides the most appropriate mechanism through which this



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recommendation can be operationalised. Doing so is not simply a matter of improving representation. It is about ensuring that Australia's cultural institutions accurately reflect the complexity of contemporary Australian society and recognise Muslim Australians as contributors to, rather than peripheral participants in, the national story.

The question for the next National Cultural Policy is therefore not whether Muslim Australian stories belong within Australia's cultural landscape. They already do. The challenge is whether Australia's institutions, funding systems and cultural infrastructure are prepared to recognise, support and sustain those stories as part of the nation's shared cultural future.

Recommendation 2: Operationalise Recommendation 50 of A National Response to Islamophobia

Within the first 18 months of the next policy, commit to the establishment of a national institution (provisionally the Australian Muslim Centre for Arts, Culture and Heritage) giving effect to Recommendation 50.

Recommendation 3: National Muslim Creative Industries Fund

Establish, within Creative Australia, a dedicated multi-year production-capital investment stream for Muslim Australian creative work across literature, screen, music, visual arts, performance, design, architecture, fashion, food, comedy, digital storytelling, community arts and interdisciplinary practice. The Fund is distinct from the Centre at Recommendation 2: the Centre is infrastructure; the Fund is production capital. Both are required. Assessment should be by a peer panel with majority Muslim Australian representation drawn from across the disciplinary and community diversity of the sector.

Recommendation 4: Embed representation thresholds in major Commonwealth funding agreements

Funding agreements of the Major Performing Arts Organisations, the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework members, the National Collecting Institutions and the National Arts Training Organisations should include annual reporting against the cultural, linguistic and faith diversity of programmed work, acquired work and organisational leadership. Reporting should be published annually, benchmarked against ABS population data, and measure representation by creative control (writer, director, curator, producer, commissioner) not on-stage or on-wall visibility alone.



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Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

The principle that artists should be free to create, challenge, provoke and contribute to public debate without fear of political interference is fundamental to any democratic cultural system. Yet recent events have exposed significant weaknesses in the frameworks that govern artistic independence within Australia's publicly funded cultural institutions.

Over the past several years, a series of high-profile controversies have demonstrated that artists, writers, curators and cultural practitioners can become vulnerable when their work intersects with politically contested issues. The issue extends beyond any individual controversy. At its core lies a broader governance question: what obligations do publicly funded cultural institutions owe to artists when artistic work becomes the subject of public, political or media pressure?

Australia currently lacks a coherent national framework addressing this question. The absence of clear standards creates uncertainty not only for artists themselves, but also for boards, executives and funding bodies seeking to navigate contentious public debates.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore reaffirm that artistic independence is not merely an aspirational value but a core democratic principle. Institutions receiving public funding should be equipped with governance frameworks that support transparent decision-making, procedural fairness and resilience in the face of external pressure. Artists should have confidence that contractual commitments, funding decisions and programming arrangements will not be altered without clear justification and due process.

Recommendation 5: National Artistic Freedom and Contractual Integrity Principles

The next National Cultural Policy should develop national Artistic Freedom and Contractual Integrity Principles within 3 months of the next policy, made a condition of Commonwealth funding for all Creative Australia partnership-funded organisations and National Collecting Institutions. The Principles should address: obligations when artists become subjects of organised public pressure; standards of due process and procedural fairness before cancellation or program alteration; the burden of justification; mandatory written reasons; and minimum compensation where cancellation is for reasons other than artistic performance or contractual breach. Ancestry, race, religion and political opinion should be protected on equivalent terms, consistent with the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth) as interpreted in *Lattouf v ABC*.



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Recommendation 6: Strengthen Cultural Governance and Institutional Independence

The National Cultural Policy should require Creative Australia to fully implement the recommendations of the independent Blackhall & Pearl governance review and extend equivalent governance standards across National Collecting Institutions, Major Performing Arts Organisations, and State and Territory arts funding bodies. This should include stronger transparency and accountability mechanisms, mandatory written justification for significant programming or funding decisions, independent review processes following major governance controversies, and safeguards that protect artistic and funding decisions from undue political, reputational or external pressure. Strengthening governance in this way is essential to maintaining public confidence, protecting artistic independence and ensuring cultural institutions can support diverse and contested forms of cultural expression without fear of political interference.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Australia's cultural infrastructure extends beyond major galleries, museums, theatres and collecting institutions. It also includes community-owned spaces, places and institutions through which communities preserve heritage, transmit culture and foster belonging across generations. Yet the current cultural infrastructure landscape does not adequately recognise or invest in the physical and cultural assets that underpin Australia's multicultural story.

This gap is particularly evident within the national heritage framework. The Adelaide Mosque, established by Afghan cameleers in 1888–1889, is the oldest operational mosque on the Australian mainland and one of the most significant sites in Australia's Muslim history. Other sites of comparable historical significance exist across the country, including in Broken Hill, Perth and Brisbane. Despite their importance to Australia's social, cultural and migration history, these sites remain largely absent from the National Heritage List. More broadly, the underrepresentation of post-1788 multicultural heritage raises important questions about whose histories are formally recognised, preserved and celebrated within Australia's national memory.

These institutions often perform functions that extend well beyond cultural participation. They preserve community memory, support intergenerational transmission of language and tradition, strengthen social cohesion and provide critical pathways for civic engagement and belonging.



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Recommendation 7: National Review of Multicultural Heritage Representation

The Australian Government should commission a structured review of the National Heritage List, led by the Australian Heritage Council in consultation with culturally diverse communities, to assess the representation of post-1788 multicultural heritage. The review should identify significant sites, institutions and places associated with migrant, refugee and faith communities and develop a pathway for improved recognition, preservation and national commemoration.

Recommendation 8: Establish a Community Cultural Infrastructure Fund

The next National Cultural Policy should establish a dedicated Community Cultural Infrastructure Fund within Pillar 4 to support the development, preservation and sustainability of community-controlled cultural assets. Eligible infrastructure should include cultural centres, community arts spaces, multilingual media organisations, archives, libraries, faith-linked heritage sites of demonstrated cultural significance and other places that facilitate community cultural participation. Funding should be assessed through culturally informed processes involving practitioners and experts with relevant community knowledge to ensure equitable access and meaningful representation.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Australia's future cultural success will depend not only on what is created, but on who is reached, who participates and whose stories are able to travel. Audience engagement should therefore be understood as both a domestic and international priority. A modern cultural policy must recognise that Australia's audiences are increasingly diverse, geographically dispersed and globally connected.

Domestically, there remains a significant mismatch between where Australia's cultural infrastructure is concentrated and where many of Australia's most culturally diverse communities live. Major cultural institutions continue to be disproportionately located within inner-city centres, while some of the nation's fastest-growing and most culturally diverse populations are concentrated in outer metropolitan growth corridors. Communities in Western Sydney, South-West Sydney, outer Melbourne and comparable regional and suburban centres often have fewer opportunities to access major cultural programming, national collections and touring productions despite contributing significantly to Australia's cultural life.



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Audience development therefore requires more than increasing attendance. It requires a commitment to cultural equity. Publicly funded cultural assets should be accessible to the communities that fund them, regardless of postcode, geography or cultural background. The principles underpinning the successful *Sharing the National Collection* initiative provide an important foundation for extending access beyond traditional institutional boundaries and into communities that have historically been underserved by major cultural investment.

A future-focused cultural policy should therefore position multicultural creative practitioners not only as contributors to Australia's domestic cultural life, but as ambassadors capable of strengthening Australia's international cultural engagement and people-to-people connections.

Recommendation 9: Develop a National Cultural Diplomacy and International Creative Exchange Strategy

The Australian Government should establish a coordinated Cultural Diplomacy and International Creative Exchange Strategy led jointly by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Office for the Arts and Creative Australia. The Strategy should strengthen Australia's cultural engagement across the Indo-Pacific and other regions of strategic importance through touring programs, artist residencies, international co-productions, translation initiatives and creative exchange partnerships. It should explicitly draw upon the expertise, networks and linguistic capabilities of multicultural Australian creative practitioners and measure success through long-term relationship-building, audience engagement and cultural influence rather than solely activity outputs

Recommendation 10: Establish Audience Equity and Growth Corridor Participation Targets

The next National Cultural Policy should extend the principles of *Sharing the National Collection* to performing arts, cultural programming and public engagement activities. National Collecting Institutions, Major Performing Arts Organisations and other publicly funded cultural bodies should be required to develop and report against Audience Equity and Growth Corridor Engagement Plans. These plans should demonstrate how institutions will increase cultural participation and access in outer metropolitan and regional communities, including Western Sydney, South-West Sydney, outer Melbourne and other rapidly growing multicultural population centres. Future funding arrangements should incorporate performance measures relating to equitable audience reach and community engagement.



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Cross-cutting recommendations

The recommendations in this section are intended to operate across all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy. Together, they address a fundamental challenge confronting Australia's cultural sector: the gap between institutional commitments to diversity and the lived experiences of many culturally diverse communities.

While public cultural institutions increasingly embrace the language of inclusion, many artists, cultural workers and community organisations continue to encounter barriers to participation, unequal treatment, inconsistent responses to racism and discrimination, and limited opportunities to influence the systems that shape cultural life. These experiences undermine trust, constrain participation and weaken the capacity of cultural institutions to fulfil their democratic role.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework provides an important foundation for addressing these challenges.⁴ The cultural sector now requires complementary mechanisms that translate these principles into institutional practice. This means moving beyond symbolic commitments to diversity and establishing clear expectations regarding cultural safety, anti-racism, accountability and representation.

The following recommendations seek to strengthen the cultural sector's capacity to serve all Australians by embedding principles of fairness, participation, transparency and institutional responsibility across publicly funded cultural organisations.

Recommendation 11: National Cultural Safety and Inclusion Standards

The Australian Government should establish National Cultural Safety and Inclusion Standards for all publicly funded cultural institutions, developed collaboratively by the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia, the Australian Human Rights Commission and relevant community stakeholders. Building upon existing First Nations cultural safety frameworks while recognising the distinct experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the Standards should provide practical guidance on governance, leadership, workforce capability, visitor

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Anti-Racism Framework*, launched 26 November 2024, containing 63 recommendations for whole-of-society reform across the legal, justice, health, education, media and arts sectors: <https://humanrights.gov.au/anti-racism-framework>.



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experience, community engagement, incident response, complaint handling and organisational accountability.

The Standards should also address how institutions manage cultural and political sensitivities, ensuring that programming decisions, artistic expression and community participation are guided by transparent principles rather than reputational risk or external pressure. Compliance should be progressively introduced over a three-year period and incorporated into Commonwealth funding and reporting requirements.

Recommendation 12: National Cultural Sector Anti-Racism and Equity Framework

The Office for the Arts should develop a National Cultural Sector Anti-Racism and Equity Framework in partnership with Creative Australia, the Australian Human Rights Commission and relevant community representatives. The Framework should align with the National Anti-Racism Framework and establish a coordinated approach to addressing systemic barriers, discrimination and unequal participation across the arts, culture and heritage sectors.

The Framework should support institutions to strengthen organisational capability, improve workforce diversity, embed equitable decision-making practices, enhance community trust and develop clear mechanisms for identifying and responding to racism and exclusion. Importantly, it should recognise that cultural equity is not solely a workforce issue but extends to funding, programming, governance, acquisitions, commissioning and audience engagement. Adoption of the Framework should become a condition of Commonwealth cultural investment.

Recommendation 13: National Cultural Equity Advisory Panel and Sector Monitoring Program

The Australian Government should establish a standing National Cultural Equity Advisory Panel to provide ongoing advice regarding implementation of the National Cultural Policy and the participation of culturally diverse communities across the cultural sector. The Panel should include practitioners, community leaders, researchers and representatives from diverse cultural, linguistic and faith backgrounds, supported through a dedicated secretariat and transparent governance arrangements.

To strengthen evidence-based policymaking, the Government should also establish a national monitoring and research program to measure participation, representation and equity outcomes across publicly funded cultural institutions. Annual reporting should capture data relating to



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funding allocation, programming, leadership representation, workforce participation, acquisitions, audience engagement and barriers to participation.

Conclusion

The next National Cultural Policy must be a policy of renewal, equity and institutional maturity and accountability.

The challenges confronting Australia's cultural sector are not isolated incidents, nor the product of individual organisational failures. They reveal deeper structural vulnerabilities within the nation's cultural infrastructure. The findings are no longer anecdotal.

This submission argues that the next National Cultural Policy provides a unique opportunity to address that gap. The policy review is not simply an exercise in arts funding reform. It is an opportunity to determine what kind of cultural nation Australia intends to become. At stake is more than the future of individual organisations or programs. At stake is public trust in cultural institutions, confidence in democratic participation and the ability of all Australians to see themselves reflected within the nation's cultural life.

The recommendations contained within this submission offer a practical pathway towards that objective. Taken together, they would strengthen cultural governance, expand community cultural infrastructure, improve representation and accountability, support artistic freedom, enhance cultural diplomacy and create a more equitable framework for participation across the sector. They would help ensure that Australia's cultural institutions are not only more diverse in appearance, but more democratic in structure, more representative in leadership and more resilient in practice.

The next chapter of cultural policy should be measured by something more ambitious: our capacity to create institutions in which all communities can participate as equal partners in shaping the nation's cultural future. The Office of the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia stands ready to work collaboratively with government, cultural institutions, artists and communities to support implementation and help realise a cultural sector that reflects the full complexity, creativity and diversity of contemporary Australia.



THE OFFICE OF AUSTRALIA'S SPECIAL ENVOY TO COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA

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