

National Cultural Policy Submission

Name: Liam Wilkinson

The Hon Tony Burke, MP, Minister for the Arts

Dear Minister,

As a young creative studying at university, I hold a vested interest in the future of our great nation's cultural and artistic landscape. With the consideration of a new National Cultural Policy for the first time in nearly a decade, this is my generation's opportunity to contribute to Australia's identity as a champion of the arts. We as a nation are fortunate enough to have fostered a thriving, multicultural mecca for diversity and the celebration of difference between our citizens. It is my view that this new National Cultural Policy must widen the purview of its considerations regarding the five goals of Creative Australia. This will best equip our arts sector with the resources and guidance necessary to re-establish a thriving, vibrant cultural landscape following the decimation of said sector over the last 30 months.

Among tertiary students, there is an observably dominant discourse surrounding the lack of a cultural identity representative of the Australian nation.¹ While this may not be attributable to the goals and focuses of Creative Australia, a finger can be pointed toward the lack of funding our arts sector is equipped with to fulfill these ideals.² The recommendation to broaden the included goals of this cultural policy hopes to provide greater access to community-based artistic projects for a greater portion of the Australian population. This is how Australia will forge an international identity for itself as a culturally involved nation.

Art is not a commodity that can survive on the free market. Art is an investment in the people of one's nation, a practice that reflects the shared experiences of the diverse trials and tribulations faced by the Australian citizen. The initial propulsion of Australia's performing arts sector, post-World War two, reflects a half-decent approach that we can learn from in the modern day. Coombs found in the establishment of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (1954) that increasing funding to decentralised institutions of the arts greatly bolstered Australian cultural identity and facilitated a nation of vibrant artistic expression.³ Where modern academics can identify shortcomings of Coombs' proposed plan, are his intentions of allowing this bustling arts sector to develop into a state of self-sustainability.⁴ Because the performing arts sector suffers from 'cost disease', the free market of a neo-liberal capitalist society will never provide a nation's arts sector with the sufficient nurturing necessary to fulfill its social responsibility.⁵

¹ Alison Carroll, "'Australia Has No Culture': Changing the Mindset of the Cringe," *The Conversation*, November 8, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/australia-has-no-culture-changing-the-mindset-of-the-criinge-85995>.

² Guy Morrow, "Why Arts and Culture Appear to Be the Big Losers in This Budget," *The Conversation*, March 31, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-arts-and-culture-appear-to-be-the-big-losers-in-this-budget-180127>.

³ Karen Hands, "Too Big to Fail: Rethinking the Foundations of Australia's Performing Arts Policies," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27, no. 4 (July 16, 2020): 437–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1786079>.

⁴ artshub-au, "The Problem with Arts Funding Goes back to Its Inception," *ArtsHub Australia*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/opinions-analysis/the-problem-with-arts-funding-goes-back-to-its-inception-260435-2367427/>.

⁵ W. J. Baumol and W. G. Bowen, "On the Performing Arts: The Anatomy of Their Economic Problems," *The American Economic Review* 55, no. 1/2 (1965): 495–502, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1816292.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Af3536c77f558fe9e6e1c57529cf7ecd9&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1.

The Australian arts sector currently employs 217,000 people and contributes \$14.7bn to Gross Domestic Product.⁶⁷ These numbers solidify the sectors place as a major economic contributor to the Australian economy despite receiving reduced government assistance since the coalition took government in 2013.⁸ Broadening the previous goals outlined in Creative Australia will provide more opportunity to inject necessary funding to further strengthen the arts sector's contribution to Australia's economy.

The fourth goal of Creative Australia, to strengthen artistic institutions and organisations, does not suggest that our arts funding prioritise the handful of established organisations that comparatively produce much fewer works of art for a much smaller audience not as socially representative of the Australian people. The 28 major performing arts (MPA) organisations of the Australian arts sector are not subject to the same rigorous artistic peer review that small to medium artists and organisations are expected to complete.⁹ This provides a sense of funding security for these organisations to continue operating on a much larger scale than their smaller counterparts. While this seems a logical practice for the strengthening of our international image for supporting the fine arts, I believe it works against our established view of the social responsibility of the arts and our broader cultural sector. The arts are responsible for creating mediums within which the Australian population can explore, rationalise, and engage in discourse about our vastly diverse and multicultural social landscape.¹⁰

I would like the future of Australia's cultural sector to recognise the complex ecology of small to medium artistic organisations and practices. These organisations are those that seek to express the stories and experiences of the Australian people. These organisations are the practitioners that take arts and culture to every corner of this country and involve individuals in creative practices that seek to express the challenges rooted at the core of what it means to be an Australian.

I conclude this brief with a quote by Australian artist and university lecturer Dr. Lisa Radford: "art is an infrastructural national body – a body consisting of artists, art workers, curators, writers, performers, universities, museums, galleries, theatres and publications – both offline and online – that primarily sit outside the (at times advantageous) lens of the government."¹¹ Let us not forget the intricate network of individuals and smaller organisations, upon the backs of which we as an Australian people can experience art in our daily lives.

I thank you for your important work at this critical time.

Sincerely,

Liam Wilkinson

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Australian Industry: 2020-2021 Financial Year," May 27, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/industry-overview/australian-industry/latest-release#data-download>.

⁷ Australia Institute, "Polling: Gov Support for Arts Industry Popular and Necessary," April 16, 2020, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/polling-gov-support-for-arts-industry-popular-and-necessary/>.

⁸ Ben Eltham, "'Setting Us up to Fail': Funding Uncertainty Brings Arts Companies to a Crisis Point," the Guardian, November 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/nov/15/setting-us-up-to-fail-funding-uncertainty-brings-arts-companies-to-a-crisis-point>.

⁹ Jackie Bailey and Lance Richardson, "Meaningful Measurement: A Literature Review and Australian and British Case Studies of Arts Organizations Conducting 'Artistic Self-Assessment,'" *Cultural Trends* 19, no. 4 (December 2010): 291–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2010.515004>.

¹⁰ The Australian Collaboration, "The Role of the Arts in Australia," ed. Andrea Hull, The Australian Collaboration, August 2013, <https://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/pdf/FactSheets/Role-Arts-FactSheet.pdf>.

¹¹ Lisa Radford, "Exhibitions at Neon Parc, Melbourne," The Saturday Paper, May 16, 2020, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/visual-art/2020/05/16/exhibitions-neon-parc-melbourne/15895512009849#hrd>.