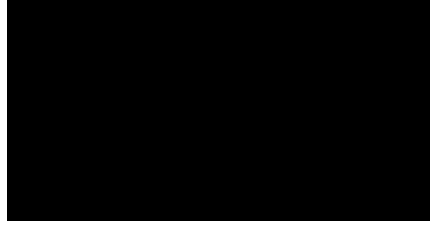


National Cultural Policy Submission

John Collee



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To whom it concerns
Department of infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Re National Cultural Policy

Hello,

I am writing to you as joint Vice-Chair of the Australian Writers Guild, but these views are entirely my own so my main qualification for writing is as an active and enthusiastic member of the Australian creative community for the past thirty years.

Firstly I'd like to say how enormously refreshing to finally have a government in power who recognises the enormous value of our entertainment industry, not just in the projection of soft power overseas, and certainly not just in the huge contribution which this industry makes to the country's bottom line financially.

The best art defines us as a nation, affirms our values, articulates our common philosophy. And by the best art I don't mean the most highbrow or exclusive. I have co-written film classics like "Happy Feet" and "Master and Commander", and adapted Aussie crowd-pleasers like (currently) an adaptation for Netflix of "Boy Swallows Universe" but the work I'm most proud of was a film called "Tanna", made for a pittance, in local dialect, in collaboration with a small island community on Vanuatu, which went on to be nominated for a best foreign language Oscar.

I believe our natural policy should reach into every corner of our national (and inter national) life. I believe that every large Australian industry should employ a creative writer or artist-in-residence to articulate its values and beliefs, not through stale industry blurbs but through paintings, sculpture, music, theatre or fiction which have the capacity to communicate what workers in that industry or occupation actually feel in their bones.

On that point: there's a totally unhelpful divide between the do-ers and the thinkers in modern society. Every good writer knows that it's impossible to create anything of meaning

without a long and detailed immersion among the people who actually do stuff. My early novels came from my experience working as a doctor and couldn't have been written without that. Artists need to be embedded (on a proper wage) with our industries, our care providers, our teachers, our armed forces, our miners, our most remote communities from the Antarctic fishing fleet to the Torres Straits. The less glamorous and demanding the work, the better because that's where great stories are unearthed. The film "Kenny" provides just one example of that.

I believe that large foreign films and streaming services should be obliged to contribute significantly to local product, as they do in, say France or Canada; and I believe that "Australian" artworks in literature, film and visual art are anything produced by an Australian which communicates how they feel about the world and their place in it. The strongest and most significant viewpoints are often held by the most marginalised amongst us, which is why I believe very strongly in positive discrimination towards minorities and financially disadvantaged communities. A culture is defined not just by the care it gives these groups, but also by the voice it gives them.

From an economist's point of view the amazing thing about culture is that its value is almost entirely unrelated to its cost. That's a really important thing to bear in mind when discussing these issues with the bean-counters. When people ask me how to turn their story into a feature film I tell them not to bother: it's a vastly expensive, overblown medium, like opera, with a slim chance of return. So, develop your story, initially, as theatre, (As Baz did with *Strictly Ballroom*) perform it as a one-man/woman show, make it as a podcast, write it as a novel, create it as a documentary, shoot it as a series of short films on an I-phone - and once it finds a massive audience in one of those media, I guarantee that someone will eventually want to make a TV show or a movie of it.

Arts organisations love giving large grants to blockbuster movies – because there's a chance of huge returns at the box office, (and failing that, a trip to Cannes) but the smaller casinos of podcasts, long-form journalism, sketch shows and local theatre actually offer much better returns for vastly smaller outlay. We should be investing in the hatcheries for minnows, at least as much as we spend on the big fish.

Finally, speaking as a privileged, older white person, I'd like to say a word about craft. The best art is created when passion is harnessed to craft. The passion often comes from younger practitioners but the craft comes from experience. That's why mentoring and outreach programmes are so important and so cost effective, and I'd strongly encourage you to finance these.

Happy to talk further and for this statement to be public.

With best wishes

John Collee
Full list of writing credits at johncollee.com