

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: On behalf of government or government body, As an individual

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

Vital Registrations and historical individual government data include First Nations people. These are the fundamental records of the very existence—birth, family formation, death—with connections to past and current generations in time and place of every Australian, including First Australians. These can be enhanced by Mission, Reserve and ‘Native Welfare’ records. If we are to understand the impact of colonisation on First Nations people, we have to find them, name, record and map them using advanced digital technologies and historical demographic analysis.

A Place for Every Story

We have the best vital registrations in the world and the most complete registration of our people of any democratic country, starting with our convict archives. All these need to be digitised and made machine readable, linked across the continent, mapped with GIS, expanded with other biographical data collected by community researchers. We could build an **Historical Register of the People of Australia** that would be the best in the world. We could also, as in WA, link that data to confidential datasets generated by Medicare, hospitals, social welfare agencies—to give us a world-leading data bank for medical, social, economic and cultural research.

The Centrality of the Artist

The ‘artists’ in this sense are the general public, who as volunteer genealogists and local historians can be recruited and trained to undertake correction of transcriptions from hand-written records (usually done overseas as double-entry transcription) and to value add familial, geographic links and events. Blocks of data that is free from privacy embargo, could be made available to researchers, including local history groups, with their work adding to the national data store. This Historical Register of the Australian People would be a national family history, created by the people and used by the people.

Strong Institutions

This work strengthens citizens’ attachment to the institutions of the state that protect our cultural heritage and health, and use data for social and economic policy. The COVID crisis exposed a major weakness in our civic literacy around the role of the state in our Commonwealth.

Reaching the Audience

Public input and support can be communicated through the national networks of public libraries and family and local history societies. These nodes can provide computers, resources and training, as well as assist in the vital work of team building and community. This has been achieved already in ARC funded convict history projects. It is a proven model

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

There is so much still to discover about the history of colonisation, and in particular its effects from generation to generation. The fundamental tool of that work is genealogy, tracing lives and families through time and place, through changes in policies and practices: locating those private lives in the public history of race relations, discrimination, 'management', child removal and family destabilization. Using this data for Victoria, we can show how 'the gap' emerged in response to direct government policy; how exclusion worked and the damage that did as measured in lives shortened and lost. We can see infant mortality and tuberculosis getting worse in the early twentieth century while poor whites were doing better. This work, which would need Indigenous researchers and volunteers, is hugely healing to people. Genealogy has kept the hearts of Aboriginal Australia still beating amidst the most determined efforts at forced assimilation. It records connection to family, to clan and to Country, and therefore alienation by History. We have the records and the people to do this work. We just need the funding from all States and Territories and the Commonwealth to take the first steps in getting these records transcribed in linked in data sets. WA Data Linkage has shown how this can be done, as has 'Digitising Scotland'. The records belong to the states, but the Commonwealth needs to co-ordinate and provide the means to linkage to national health and social data.

A Place for Every Story

An Historical Register of the People of Australia would be the foundational place for every story of every person who died on this land after being born here or having come here. Our death records include place of birth and time in Australia. We can map our migrant history, and in many cases, their back story.

The Centrality of the Artist

This project places people at the centre of their own historical story making.

Strong Institutions

See above

Reaching the Audience

The audience will go on for ever and be reached in projects, in academic work, in films, books, articles and online publications. This is our foundational story, and the quality of our historical records of our people is the upside of being once a British colony.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

Recognition that history making is creative and it is democratic. A nation that does not nourish history making in the preservation and dissemination of primary sources, official archives, museum artifacts and in the promotion of history in education and in the community, is marching into the future blind. We impoverish our children if they do not learn how the world works, and how it got to be the way it is. Historical knowledge gives us guidance on that may happen next and how we can act. We need to know the past to be able to imagine the future. History is fundamental to us as human beings, and as a nation. Starve it, and you stunt us.