

# National Cultural Policy Submission

## The Australian Historical Association

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

**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

**(i) Australia's national cultural institutions should be better funded so that they can contribute to the process of truth-telling envisaged in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.**

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the process of truth-telling that it calls for. The AHA has First Nations historians among its members and supports collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. We see a critical role for history, and especially for Indigenous historians, in a national cultural policy that recognises the history, culture and diversity of First Nations peoples. Such a policy needs to support the galleries, libraries, archives and museums that are essential to historical research. It also needs to support First Nations communities and community historians to tell their own stories in ways that are meaningful and accessible to the communities concerned, as well as to the wider Australian people. For such communities, history can be a source of cultural resurgence. History has at times been complicit in the oppression of Indigenous people. However, research carried out by historians has also been critical in examining the violence at the heart of the colonising process, as well as the stories of resistance, survival, and adaptation that are integral to First Nations history. Many of these are nationally important stories that deserve a wide audience; it is these stories that will, in many cases, find their way into film, theatre, historical fiction and even dance, and the wider national consciousness.

### A Place for Every Story

**(ii) The Australian War Memorial should be moved from Veterans' Affairs to the Arts portfolio.**

Robust democracies rest on the foundations of a community that feels recognised and represented. The stories of many Australians – especially First Nations peoples – have sometimes been ignored. They were part of what W.E.H. Stanner called 'The Great Australian Silence'. There has, however, been a significant and welcome democratisation of history over the last half-century, which has seen the stories of working-class people, women, immigrants, First Nations peoples and sexual minorities attract increasing attention. Yet untapped potential still lies in the richness of Australian records and the use of modern digital technology, as Professor Janet McCalman AC has argued in proposing a 'Historical Register of the People of Australia'.

In seeking to represent the diverse experiences and stories of Australians, we suggest that too much emphasis has been placed in recent decades on funding of Anzac commemoration at the expense of other stories potentially meaningful to Australians. The anomalous place of the Australian War Memorial, which belongs to all Australians, in Veterans' Affairs (instead of the Arts portfolio with the other national cultural institutions) only encourages this lack of balance and proportion.

More attention needs to be given to helping Australians understand their history in all its richness and diversity.

## **The Centrality of the Artist**

Historians work in a range of institutions and occupations, from universities and schools through to museums, libraries and archives. Some work in the world of public history as historical consultants and commissioned historians. The history world is both vibrant and diverse, but it is also, in many places, characterised by job insecurity and decaying career structures. Universities are critical in training and employing historians, but their academic workforce has experienced a relentless casualisation. It is critical for the future of history in this country that young people can see for themselves a career in history and this outcome will only be possible if institutions are supported (See below). Australia was a pioneer in the emergence of the public historian as a professional role in the 1970s, and many of our finest historians – from Geoffrey Blainey through to Tom Griffiths to Grace Karskens – have had careers in history that, for long periods, have not been conventionally ‘academic’. They have produced history outside universities for a range of public purposes and, in the process, have enriched community appreciation of the nation’s past. We also need an environment in which organisations that represent and advance cultural expression can flourish.

### **Strong Institutions**

- (iii) The efficiency dividend be abandoned in relation to national cultural institutions.**
- (iv) The National Archives of Australia should have a purpose-built home worthy of its importance to the nation, sufficient funding to preserve its collections, and the processes, staffing and resources to make its collection accessible in a timely and efficient manner.**
- (v) The National Library of Australia needs more, and more secure, funding to do its important work of making Australian culture accessible, within and beyond Australia, through Trove and its physical collections.**
- (vi) The government should appoint historians with appropriate standing, experience and expertise to the boards and councils of the major national cultural institutions.**

Many of Australia’s leading cultural institutions are at crisis point due to severe underfunding. The ability of historians to tell the national story has been undermined by a lack of resources in national collections and unreasonable wait times to gain access to documents. It is critical that the federal government provides better support for the country’s national cultural infrastructure. For example, the National Archives of Australia (NAA) frequently fails to provide timely access to open-period (usually 20 years after their creation) documents. A process that, by law, is supposed to take ninety business days can sometimes drag on for years as documents are referred to originating agencies and enter a large backlog. As a direct result of such delays, research projects on Australian history, potential PhD topics, and international collaborative opportunities are being lost and large sections of our national story, remain untold. Further, some of its holdings, especially in the audio-visual field, remain vulnerable to disintegration. Last year the NAA was reduced to crowd funding to try and preserve their priceless holdings. This was a moment of national shame. The Tune Review estimated that on current funding and staffing levels just 6 per cent of the audio-visual magnetic tape collection will be digitised by 2025. There are also growing concerns among historians about the extent of redaction being undertaken to open-period documents under the exemption provisions of the legislation.

The National Library of Australia’s Trove has done great work in digitising historic newspapers and other documents and making Australian stories accessible to a wide national and international audience. However, the impact of inadequate budget outlays and the continuing imposition of efficiency dividends has resulted in the winding back of services to the public. The story is much the same across the national cultural institutions: the National Film and Sound Archive has often been poorly supported, for instance.

The councils and boards of all of these institutions draw on an increasingly narrow range of people – predominantly legal and business – with historians (and especially academic historians) now rigorously

excluded. These institutions sometimes behave in ways that reflect this lack of connection to research communities.

## **Reaching the Audience**

- (vii) The government should give attention to how Australian universities' world-leading performance in open access publishing can increase national and global audiences for Australian culture, including history.**
- (viii) That historical programming be strengthened in Australia's public broadcasters.**
- (ix) That stronger mandates for Australian content be applied to commercial streaming services.**

History in Australia is disseminated in many ways, from books, journals, television series, podcasts and web-based resources. Historians play a central role in the creation of these histories as authors, interviewees and consultants. Australian historians benefit from the support of university libraries, which pioneered open access, and from university presses, which have long supported authors in making their work accessible to a wide reading public. Open access publication, which is suitable for many although not all kinds of historical writing, permits anyone with an internet connection to read high-quality work. Even under the existing constraints of large multinational publishers' influence and a lack of resources, it is having a transformative effect on access to knowledge and culture. Yet these presses often operate on a shoestring and authors are required to make significant contributions to publishing costs. The full potential of our university presses to contribute to national – and global – conversations about history remains unrealised.

Historians also work with the media (especially the ABC, SBS and NITV) to create broadcast content and to make their research available to Australian audiences. As teachers of students in schools and universities, we believe it is critical that government plays a role in supporting the production of high-quality historical content through both public broadcasting and commercial media.

The public broadcasters have an admirable tradition of producing history documentaries for television and radio. However, despite the popularity of *Who Do You Think You Are?* on SBS, there are few dedicated television programs for history on free-to-air television, only occasional one-off documentary series. History is critical to the ABC's charter obligations to 'contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community'. A strong ABC is critical to Australia's vibrant historical culture.

A national cultural policy should provide stronger support for the inclusion of Australian content (both new and back catalogues) on commercial streaming services. Australian stories (including histories) need to be where Australian viewers are, and they must be produced in engaging and appealing ways to ensure that they attract the widest possible audiences.

**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** - See above

**A Place for Every Story** - See above

**The Centrality of the Artist** - See above

**Strong Institutions** - See above

**Reaching the Audience** - See above

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

(x) Increase GST registration threshold to \$215,000

Currently, the GST registration threshold for NFP organisations is \$150,000. This is a major impediment to the development of Australia's cultural sector, preventing many associations from growing. Small and medium NFP associations like the Australian Historical Association do not have the means and resources to carry out the work associated with GST registration. Not only would this significantly increase membership fees (putting us at risk of losing lower-income members), it would also increase administrative loads within the organisation. As a result, we limit our operations to remain under the \$150,000 GST registration threshold. The problem is that the GST registration threshold has not been increased for many years. We understand that the last adjustment was in the 2007-08 Budget, which increased the threshold from \$100,000 to \$150,000. It seems both logical and fair that the threshold be reviewed at least to keep up with inflation and the cumulative price change within this 15-year period. Taking those changes into account, preliminary calculations based on ABS data suggest this would put the GST registration threshold for NFP organisations at around \$215,000. This is a clear and practical measure that would have a significant impact on the development, strengthening and vitality of Australian cultural organisations.