

# National Cultural Policy Submission

**Stephen Cassidy**

Submitted: As an individual

## **SUBMISSION TO NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY CONSULTATION**

Stephen Cassidy, cultural researcher, writer and commentator

*I am making a submission about the National Cultural Policy because for the last eight years I have been a cultural commentator and researcher, with links to the creative sector through my role with DESIGN Canberra and on the Board of Craft ACT and the education sector through my role as an Adjunct with the University of Canberra.*

*My direct involvement with the previous National Cultural Policy was as Director of the Task Force within the Australia Government which co-ordinated the development of the 'Creative Australia' Policy, and particularly the broad-based consultation process which produced it.*

When I heard that the Albanese Government, with Tony Burke as Arts Minister, would be basing its updated National Cultural Policy on the 'Creative Australia' policy launched in 2013, I was pleased because in many respects that was a very good and comprehensive policy. It was developed after broad consultation with all the resources of a Government in office. This went well beyond the arts sector, with important bodies like the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council amongst many others beyond the creative sector commenting – and that showed.

### **Cultural diversity**

However, the one feature that wasn't as strong as it could have been was its recognition of the importance of cultural diversity. The National Cultural Policy acknowledged cultural diversity but in my view it didn't recognise sufficiently how critical and central it was. As a result it didn't practically reflect its importance in the package of measures 'Creative Australia' introduced to implement its vision. Yet the strongest message of all from the broad public consultation which helped produce the National Cultural Policy at the time was that it had to reflect Australia's diversity.

When the last national cultural policy was being finalised in 2012, more than 43% of the Australian population or at least one of their parents were born overseas. Now, as its successor is being developed after a cultural policy vacuum of more than nine years, that figure has been superseded, with over half the population or at least one of their parents born overseas. This makes a strong focus on the dynamic promise of our cultural diversity essential for any successful policy. Unfortunately, the main shortcoming of the previous policy was that it didn't make this focus as strong as it needed to be, which was unfortunate because the policy was otherwise very good and comprehensive.

Our cultural diversity, from the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, cultures and languages which underpin Australian culture, bolstered by waves of migration, is potentially our most important national asset.

### **Arts policy or cultural policy?**

Focusing only on the themes of the current consultation risks producing an arts policy, rather than a cultural policy, something more suited to a body like the Australia Council, rather than the Australian Government as a whole. The objectives seem reasonable enough but what is missing is any reference to the creative economy and creative industries and a dynamic analysis of cultural diversity as the interaction of different cultures – and the link to innovation that arises from this diversity. Cultural diversity fosters innovation because innovation occurs where cultures intersect and differing world-views come into contact and fixed ideas and old ways of doing things are challenged and assessed.

In comparison the objectives of 'Creative Australia' were strongly focused on the broader role of creativity and culture. Two of the major goals in 'Creative Australia' seem to be missing entirely from this latest consultation document:

Goal 4: Strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector to contribute to national life, community wellbeing and the economy.

Goal 5: Ensure Australian creativity thrives in the digitally enabled 21st century, by supporting innovation, the development of new creative content, knowledge and creative industries.

This seems to be at cross purposes with Minister Burke's earlier comments that with the previous National Cultural Policies developed by Labor Governments, 'in each case it was a whole of government exercise. Because anyone who understands the sector knows arts isn't simply about entertainment, leisure and hobbies. At its best it affects our education policy, our health policy, our trade, our relations around the world, our industrial relations approach and is a driver of economic growth.' Minister Burke quite correctly has pointed out that the Arts are important in their own right and do not need to be justified in economic or social terms. Yet it is equally important to recognise that the Arts, creativity and culture *do* have an important economic and social role that has to be taken account of.

### **Broader impacts of creativity and culture**

Both economic relevance and a sense of being embedded with community are complementary aspects of contemporary creativity and culture that make it so strong a force. It connects both the economic role of culture and creativity and their community role of building resilience, well-being, social inclusion and liveable cities. What they have in common is that both spring from the reality that culture and creativity are integral to everyday life and the essential activities that make it up.

As a result of its broad approach there were important elements in 'Creative Australia' that relate directly to the emphasis on First Nations communities, such as the inclusion of support for Traditional Cultural Expressions, amongst which the ongoing Government support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages is crucial. While there was no funding for this element in the Policy, it was important and ground-breaking in laying out protocols and strategies for this important area.

This raises the question of what is the status of the National Indigenous Languages Policy announced by the Labor Government in 2009, elements of which were picked up by 'Creative Australia'. While that policy was mixed in quality, it was an important one – Australia's first ever national Indigenous languages policy. How will the priorities in that policy – the result of many decades of work at community level by First Nations language workers – be incorporated in the new National Cultural Policy?

### **UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention**

Australia is signatory to an important set of international conventions that help protect both First Nations culture and Australian culture generally. The Rudd Labor Government ratified the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2009 and undertook to consider ratification of the complementary UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Prominent cultural economist Professor David Throsby has previously called for ratification of this important convention, as it completes a set of conventions that work in tandem, including the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

The process of consideration occurred but ratification never eventuated. There was no compelling objection to ratifying it and much to be gained from the positive and productive engagement internationally on this issue that would be much enhanced by ratification. This would reinforce and support the existing work in this area by Australian cultural institutions and Non-Government Organisations.

### **Cross-referencing other Government policies**

One of the most positive features of 'Creative Australia' was the way it enabled much greater whole-of-Government liaison and co-operation to occur, something many of the submissions to the community consultation called for. This included such parallel initiatives as the Convergence Review of the Department of Communications into the future of media and communications and the Book Industry Strategy Group in association with the Department of Industry and Innovation. It is crucial that the new National Cultural Policy cross-references other Government policies, such as Indigenous policy, industry policy and so on.

### **Role of Government**

'Creative Australia' clearly focused on outlining the specific role that *Government* could play in supporting creativity and culture. In the current process this also raises the question of how any national cultural policy announced by the Australian Government is related to the substantial and strategic role of States and Territories, and particularly Local Government, in supporting creativity and culture.

Minister Burke has commented that Labor wants to restore co-operation and dialogue between the Federal Minister and State Ministers, and include Local Government. Coming on the back of the massive, largely successful, role played by the States and Territories of whatever political brand during the pandemic – at least until recently – coupled with their role in starting to address climate change, this could be an approach which delivers a great deal.

## **Far beyond funding**

The sticky issue in these pandemic-ravaged times will be funding for this blueprint in a time of massive deficits due to the response to the pandemic. However, funding is a secondary matter – most important is a strong understanding of the importance of creativity and culture and a commitment to support it across all areas of Government.

It is also important to recognise the central and distinct role that Government can play. When the Arts sector thinks about the role of government in supporting Australian arts and culture, it often focuses on funding. Yet government support for arts and culture extends far more broadly than funding – and in fact much of this support is far more important than funding.

Government involvement includes a direct role in the arts and culture sector through its own agencies, such as the national and state cultural institutions, its place in education and training subsidies and through its own arts training bodies, accreditation frameworks and curriculum, through tax incentives or deductions, schemes like the lending right programs that compensate authors for the use of their publications in public libraries, frameworks for Intellectual Property rights and payments, local content regulations, and the setting of standards and protocols that govern such things as Internet content. This doesn't even include the myriad of other ways in which Government agencies which are not mainly concerned with arts and culture, intersect with the arts and culture sphere.

Often overlooked but critical is the role of regulation, legislative frameworks (including Intellectual Property), the establishing of standards and support for international conventions. Some of the most important ways the Government supports arts and culture is through its role in education and training.

## **The Intellectual Property framework**

Arts, culture and creative industries show promise in helping address central social challenges Australia faces. In attempting to address the major issue of Indigenous disadvantage, to take just one example, it is critical to recognise that one of the most important economic resources possessed by Indigenous communities is their culture. Creative firms are already developing which draw on that cultural content. Through the intellectual property that translates it into a form that can generate income in a contemporary economy, that culture is pivotal to jobs and to income. It may not be mining but it mines a far richer seam – authentic and rich content that has already been recognised internationally for its high value, just like our iron and coal. Maintaining and developing the Intellectual Property framework is one of the most important roles national Government has.

## **Growth in population and economy**

Obviously funding is a critical part of this broader mix. Cuts in real terms to national arts and cultural funding, while relatively small each year, have a cumulative effect far greater than at first appears and, in the long run, will undermine the effectiveness of national arts and culture support. Where the real disastrous impact of these cuts will hit home is when we also factor in the impact of population growth. The cuts – both recent and older – are based on a static view of the economy and population. But Australia's economy

and population are both growing and support by Government for creativity and culture has to factor this in.