

National Cultural Policy Submission

Becky Llewlyn

Congratulations on working to renew Australia's cultural policy after a decade of a focus, funding and support desert. I applaud Minister Burke's determination to reset this, much as other great Labor administrations of Paul Keating and Julia Gillard.

What is different is that in neither of those times had we just endured a pandemic which broke so many bonds of convention, of affiliation, of trust. We are rebuilding at a time when no one knows if it is safe to sit next to someone else in a theatre or walk past them in a gallery. We have become a nation of ghosts, scared of each other's ability to make us sick.

The consequences in the arts, where I am a maker and consumer, are huge. How do you bring back a feeling of hope, of predictability, of continuity when things can change on an hourly basis? This is the huge challenge for our culture.

I support the initiatives of the five pillars, in particular of the First Nations prominence. Great art has always come from the edges of society and there is no doubt that we have relegated indigenous Australians to that place. Any work that can be done here will be good. Let's not censor what their artists will tell us.

I have concerns however about funding strong institutions. We are talking about taxpayer dollars subsidising major artforms and employment opportunities. The policy could be reserved, as it is in other industries, to encourage work solely by Australian residents and citizens. Opera singers from overseas being funded by the federal government do not sit well with my sense of fairness. They can pay for these stars out of other funding sources.

In addition, white males have had it their own way too long in the arts, especially in music, my domain as a composer. Federal funding of orchestras with 98% male composers is wrong. Would it be possible to put guidelines in place for the strong institutions to move towards more representative showings in their offerings – more women, more diversity in ethnicity, disability, gender? Surely, we see how this diversity is starting to shape the new Parliament. Why wouldn't arts funding accelerate this change with stronger criteria for selection panels, awards, grants and all decision-making roles?

Part of the cultural policy reset agenda for the new Albanese government could be a rebranding of arts generally, and the classical music stream, as a 'public good', rather than an 'industry'. Arts and culture are part of our democratic citizenship and cannot be distilled down to economic metrics alone. The key objective for new policy is to maximise the benefits to all of our community, creating a culture where individuals have a chance to flourish and contribute, where people see themselves reflected.

The action needed is complex but some ideas, it is now clear, need policy support to ensure change. Orchestras and other subsidised music ensembles need to sell tickets; hence they select from a familiar canon of classics that draws in predictable audiences. In a reset of arts and culture policy, will this federal government which espouses values of equality, bite the bullet and mandate targets for female participation to music organisations it funds? If not, why not?

Deeper structural problems exist. According to Justin O'Connor, Professor of Cultural Economy at UniSA, says part of the problem is that music has been badged as a 'creative industry' over recent decades, when in reality the arts section of music can never compete as an industry on its own. As a mixed economy of large and small-scale players, many music sectors cannot survive without subsidy, organisational support and peer-reviewed grants through the Australia Council and state arts bodies. Philanthropy can augment that base, but not replace it.

Politicians and bureaucrats know that categorising music as an 'industry' literally makes it open to exploitation, with musicians and composers having to work several jobs and risking burnout to keep going in their chosen field. Global forces like streaming services with free market distribution channels have added opportunities and challenges, but have distorted the market. We need the reset to seriously consider these trends in our ongoing pandemic world.

As you unwind your policy, make sure to leave some funding for new, surprising initiatives, not from the major bodies, but groups of artists who are innovating or advocating. Evaluation of initiatives is also crucial, and the criteria to see what is working should be broadly based, not just bums on seats. The arts work in hearts and minds. How will you measure its effect?

Best wishes

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Composer & inaugural trustee Richard Llewellyn Arts and Disability Trust

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