

## TOWARDS A NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

In his speech “A National Cultural Policy to 2020” to the National Press Club on 27 October 2009, the Australian Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts, the Hon Peter Garrett AM MP identified three key themes:

1. Keeping culture strong
2. Engaging the community; and
3. Powering the young.

The Minister asked for responses, particularly to the three questions posed:

1. What positive steps would you like to see advance Australian Culture?
2. What do you think should be priorities for a national cultural policy?
3. What other issues do you think are important?

Most important is the need to create definitions of how the Policy and therefore Government understands culture, art, cultural production, creativity and how this relates to Australian society. What do we mean by the word “Culture” – how can we be consistent and create a shared understanding of this word?

UNESCO's 2001 Declaration on Cultural Diversity noted: ‘culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.’

John Holden in the article “How We Value Arts and Culture” looks at the definitions that are still commonly held. Culture has an integral role in creating public value and informs our social, economic and environmental wellbeing and the arts play a part in this (as alluded to in the Discussion Framework) but culture is not wholly about the arts. As we all know a cultural event can be attending an exhibition or seeing a footy match. Point 2 from the Discussion Framework sums this up as it states “Culture is expressed in many ways and reflects our way of life..”

Indigenous Australians living with culture at the heart of their lives, provide direction for a Policy to be both encompassing and meaningful for all of Australia. Where culture relates to all aspects of the life lived, and cultural production and reception are small parts and the manner by which culture is shared with others. Helping us go beyond a Eurocentric understanding of the word.

The Discussion Framework lays out some good grounding statements but the use of the word culture in the framework encompasses many different meanings of culture – the Policy would benefit from up front clarification.

For example from the Discussion Framework, Points 3 and 4 touch on the role of culture in the production and transmission of values and public planning and governance - but is this the same ‘culture’ that is referred to in Point 7 as being a ‘..powerful source of wealth for the nation, contributing significantly to the economy..’ ?

Another valuable reference source is Jon Hawkes’ publication “Fourth Pillar of Sustainability”. Hawkes’ exploration of the meaning of culture, the application of culture and how this translates into public planning should be a seminal publication in the formation of public policy.

One consideration for the Australian Government is to draw together the portfolios for which the Minister is responsible, so that material culture in all its forms is considered within the scope of a National Cultural Policy. This would include cultural heritage places, which we might define as those ‘man-made’

***Responses to the discussion framework –  
NT Department of Natural Resources, Environment, the Arts and Sport.***

---

places that we value now, and which we think ought to be kept for future generations. Such places would include Aboriginal and Macassan archaeological places, as well as European built heritage, cultural landscapes, and archaeological sites. These places play a role, in their own right, in what the Discussion Paper calls the "conversation between past understandings and future vision", and play a role in "ensuring that the links between the present and the past remain strong."

The Policy could recognise and draw connections between such tangible places, and the intangible culture of our art forms, and also the manner in which we recognise important events. For example the general importance of libraries in supporting literature, and of cinemas in supporting film, and so on; but also how the site of the Eureka Stockade represents an important event in Australia's history.

A National Cultural Policy should be broad and inclusive and therefore should also:

- encompass sciences as well as the humanities, including the environment, the natural world, heritage places (embracing the full suite of the Agency & Ministerial portfolio responsibilities – environment, heritage & the arts);
- include those contributing to the creation, communication, conservation of Australia's culture: cultural production (creativity), cultural reception (performance / exhibition), cultural understanding (education, communication, memory, history), cultural conservation (archiving, preserving, conserving, accessing);
- include intangible and tangible heritage; and
- cover regional and remote as well as urban and suburban needs & interests, including infrastructure needs.

Principles that should underpin the Policy must include recognition of:

- the important role of culture in social well-being and community cohesion and vital role in achieving government priorities: social inclusion (valuing & respecting diversity); community health & well-being; national identity and social cohesion, lifelong learning;
- the unique importance of Indigenous cultural heritage;
- the value of all institutions and organisations engaged with creation, performance, communication and conservation of Australia's cultural heritage;
- the importance of Australia's collections;
- the social and economic value of cultural activities, including tourism;
- the need for sustainability of cultural support systems; and
- Governmental responsibility to ensure equity of access, participation and contribution to the nation's cultural heritage.

The Policy should be:

- community centred;
- empowering of the cultural sector (as defined above);
- supportive and nurturing of the creative industries; and
- developed in concert with community and government at all levels, including members of the Cultural Ministers' Council.

Following are some specific thoughts, priorities and ideas as relevant to the Northern Territory that seek to answer the questions posed in relation to the three themes:

Keeping Culture strong

"The culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is the unique backbone of Australian identity"  
(Discussion Framework, National Cultural Policy)

***Responses to the discussion framework –  
NT Department of Natural Resources, Environment, the Arts and Sport.***

---

Keeping culture is as important as creating it and cultural creation is dependant on access to culture. Cultural institutions (broadly inclusive term here which include museums and art galleries, science and natural history centres, historic sites, monuments, keeping places, zoos and herbaria, libraries and archives etc.) are keepers as well as creators of culture

As an example, libraries play a key role in providing access to knowledge resources, entertainment and information technology. In an environment as diverse as the Northern Territory, libraries assist in building communities by connecting people to information and each other. Differences in literacy and numeracy skills between remote and urban areas are acute and libraries, as places of learning, provide the opportunity to Territorians to learn for life, building capacity and fostering community engagement.

The Policy should recognise that:

- cultural institutions are essential to keeping culture strong so there is a critical need to maintain and develop institutions of our culture;
- we must provide specific support and focus to Indigenous culture;
- culture needs to be conserved as well as created;
- communication and distribution of culture is essential to cultural creation;
- we must strengthen the links between institutions and creation – between production, preservation and reception;
- we must ensure that there is ongoing support for innovation and risk taking within creativity; and
- we must support creativity that is foremost an expression of culture rather than a pathway to commerce.

In supporting the expression of culture through creation, the Policy can play a vital role in developing and defining our understanding of ourselves as Australians, and as humans within an increasing global environment.

Engaging the community

- Ensure that Museums are public spaces that encourage and stimulate discussion and debate, support and nurture Australia's many diverse communities and respond to evolving community expectations;
- Support digitization of collections to enable community interpretation, connection and association with cultural heritage;
- Support Indigenous cultural centres and keeping places as they continue to shape Australian identity, community and story in unique ways;
- Stimulate community care and use of local histories and art practices;
- Continue to fund programs that are responsive to community needs – regionalise decision making ;
- Review the balance of arts funding to enable a future forward focus on art forms beyond the Heritage forms currently in receipt of the lions share of government support;
- Continue the focus on audience development – and de-mystifying cultural creation and reception;
- Broaden the role of regional touring to include skills sharing and mentoring opportunities for regional Australians and young people;
- Broaden definitions of excellence to include those with community relevance;
- Continue to focus on funding festivals as a mainstay of Australian culture in urban, regional and remote areas; and
- Increase support for touring from regional and remote festivals to urban festivals to encourage regional Australian stories to be heard, valued and understood to deepen community engagement with cultural production.

### Powering the young

- Enjoyment and use of Australia's cultural institutions should be embedded in the teaching and learning strategies of the National Curriculum;
- Promote cultural production and cultural understanding in all areas of the National Curriculum (sciences, humanities and environment);
- Offer cross-curricular programs that link for example history and science, language and art through the National Curriculum;
- Encourage and support partnerships between education departments and cultural organisations;
- Encourage and support the creation of hybrid institutions, especially in regional and remote areas: sharing / learning /creating / making / enjoying/ understanding; and
- Actively promote, invest in and use new media technologies to link cultural and educational institutions

A field report provided to the NT Library in December 2009 indicates the impact on youth in an Indigenous community with an internet café. The report remarks on the impact of the footy season on the mix of genders utilising the service. It also indicates that there are a number of new faces coming through the door as word gets out about the usefulness of uploading family tree web pages and using memory sticks so that families can share family photos. This increase in computer literacy and activity indicates an increased confidence to explore technology.

'Powering our youth' also indicates the need to legitimise new forms of cultural production and reception. Legitimation implies access to subsidy, support mechanisms and a place within our institutions. It necessitates that younger voices become part of the authority structures that make decisions on 'cultural support'.

A National Cultural Policy, should ask and begin to answer the fundamental question that is explored and answered through culture – "Who are we are and what are we doing here?"

Those questions not only shape our identity, they're the foundation of culture and are often at the centre of the arts. The narratives that weave us together and the unique stories that tell us who we are as Australians and how we got here and where we're going.

The nature of cultural production is that it is fluid and it is easily glossed over, but it is the application of culture that makes the world go round and that underpins every decision we make.

Culture could be defined as the always-unfolding stories that shape our collective destiny.