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SUBMISSION TO THE  
NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY CONSULTATION

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**1. Introduction**

This formal submission has been written in response to an invitation from the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, the Hon. Peter Garrett, to participate in a national consultation on cultural policy.

**2. Scoping cultural policy**

In a speech given at the National Press Club on 27 October, 2009, the Minister declared that:

*While the arts are a core component of culture, culture is more than just the arts. It is the embodiment of values, traditions, expressions and, ultimately, hopes, and it manifests in and through many different mediums and across a very wide landscape.*

*So we begin with an essential principle, namely, affirming the right that all Australians, whatever their background, have to the benefits of cultural activity.*

This statement points to the rich mental map that is culture and how it is nurtured and depends on more than the arts. Importantly, it depends on heritage and heritage policy, which jointly work to ensure that culturally significant artifacts are captured and preserved for current and future generations.

Without such systems the culture of a people cannot be propagated from generation to generation. National systems to capture and preserve heritage are therefore a key enabler of Australia's cultural industries and assist in creating persistent cultural identity. This observation applies to both European and indigenous culture. For Aboriginal people, places where memory is kept, such as archives and digital collections, have provided the foundations for the discovery and re-assertion of a shared cultural identity, evidence of cultural association with the land that has also provided the basis of land rights and evidence of the abuse of social power.

**3. Cultural policy and the passive destruction of memory stores**

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Unfortunately, recent decisions by the Government and Minister for Arts have placed in jeopardy memory stores for the preservation of cultural heritage in documentary form. Two recent case studies are relevant:

### **1. *The Demise of Collections Council Australia (CCA)***

In October 2009, Cultural Ministers Council announced that it would stop funding, Collections Council Australia, Australia's peak body for coordination of collections related activity in the archives, gallery, library and museums sectors. Between its commencement in 2004 and demise in 2009, CCA had received \$2.1 million of funding from Cultural Ministers Council and the Australian Government with grants totaling \$2.1 million.

Chair of the CCA, Noel Turnbull, commented:

"Australia's Arts Ministers say they won't spend \$500,000 on keeping the Collections Council going, yet our equivalent organization in Norway, a country smaller in area and population than Australia, has 70 employees and an annual budget of 23.5 million Euros."<sup>2</sup>

In terms of International comparisons with Europe and the Americas, Australia is tracking in the wrong direction with digital collections. In a recent account of business value and digital collections, Oomen, Verwayen, Timmermans &, Heijmans (2009) describe a **173 million Euro** project to digitize and make available Dutch audio visual heritage via the Web.<sup>3</sup>

### **2. *Closure of National Archives of Australia Branch Offices in Hobart, Adelaide and Darwin***

In a further erosion of Australia's ability to manage cultural heritage in documentary form, the Director General of the National Archives of Australia (NAA), Mr Ross Gibbs, announced on 13 November 2009, that NAA would be closing state offices in Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart over the next two-and-a-half years as building leases expire. The decision followed on the heels of an Australian Government announcement on 2 November, 2009 that, as part of its Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) statement, Commonwealth agencies (including NAA), would have to find significant budget savings. As a consequence of MYEFO, NAA is expected to save \$2.1 million from its operating budget 2010-2013.

In Darwin, Adelaide and Hobart, the closures mean an end to on site hard copy access to Commonwealth Archives, effectively creating a second tier of inferior access provision for users in Tasmania, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Users wishing to consult

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national archives holdings in the Northern Territory, Tasmania or Hobart must rely upon online digitized copy, incomplete holdings held locally by third party service providers, or travel to offices located in other states to which holdings have been relocated. While NAA has made great progress in putting its collections online, there is no current commitment to digitize **all** records affected by the closures, nor is this considered feasible. As far as local third party access providers are concerned, it appears that little progress has been made since the announcement.

Review of NAA's operating budget (and those of its state based equivalents) reveals a picture of flagging Government support that will have long term consequences in terms of Australia's cultural heritage in documentary form.

This picture again contrasts with International comparisons. On 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2009, President Barack Obama sent to Congress a proposed Fiscal Year 2011 budget request for the Federal Government that calls for \$460,287,000 for the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).<sup>4</sup>

The OE increase will also allow NARA to hire 57 new full-time staff members to support a variety of programs. Resources have been provided to staff and operate the new National Declassification Center (NDC). The President established the NDC within NARA to overhaul the government's system of declassifying material. A new "holdings protection team" has been created to protect NARA holdings from internal and external threats. This team will develop loss prevention training and conduct compliance inspections. Staff resources under the Information Security Oversight Office have been increased for the Controlled Unclassified Information Office to support expanded mission requirements. Finally, this increase in OE funding will support 12 new entry-level staff archivists, which will enable NARA to continue building a cadre of new archivists to address the agency's growing records management workload.

The President also recommends a 3.7 percent increase in the budget for NARA's Inspector General to hire one additional auditor.

For continued development and deployment of the Electronic Records Archives (ERA), the President is seeking \$85,500,000, the same amount appropriated for the current fiscal year. The ERA is NARA's response to the rapidly increasing numbers of electronic records being created by the Federal Government, and will preserve these important records so that they can be viewed by anyone, anywhere, at any time.

### **3. Conclusion**

Current directions in Australia's cultural heritage policy have downplayed the importance of systems for the management of cultural heritage collections in documentary form. Real degradation of Australia's capability for managing documentary heritage is currently taking place and this degradation is occurring at a time when other OECD economies are spending more, particularly on digital initiatives. As part of the Government's review of cultural

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heritage policy, it is urged to reconsider the direction on which it has embarked, since this involves damage to Australia's cultural heritage collections, that will not easily be reversed.