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Submission:

TOWARDS A NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

1. Every country's culture is unique. It is the uniqueness that makes it identifiable as culture. Culture is what identifies one country from another. Culture used to include distinctive speech, dress, food, customs, manners, sports, arts and crafts, architecture. The global revolution has removed, homogenised, most of these in obvious every day use. American culture has permeated the world; there are ads for Coke and billboards advertising Hollywood blockbusters in the most unexpected places. There is little left to differentiate one world city from another in the 21st century. However, human beings still require identity, collective as well as individual.

2. The culture that is appreciated by citizens and visitors alike consists of the things, glaring and subtle, which mark us as belonging to a certain country or tribe. If this is not nurtured at government level, people will make it for themselves, often not to the benefit of the country as a whole.

3. The more subtle reflections of culture may be called 'high' culture: visual arts, music, dance, theatre, literature. These are the less obvious languages that describe emotions, connection to country, a tribe, feelings of belonging, or recognition, which speak on other levels to every day prosaic talk. Where these have developed over many, many centuries, they can be accepted as belonging to a culture without question. But Australia is a 'young' country. The languages came with our forebears. We must accept that learning to 'read' or produce these skills benefits from specialised education. They connect us with our history, and the history of our land. There is much documented evidence that learning these languages, [known as the arts], as part of our general education, develops the capacities of the brain, enhances intellectual abilities, as well as providing people with choices of self-improving, engrossing, possibly money-making, activities, both individually and socially.

4. Australia has a very recent implanted society that is expanding all the time. The first migrants brought their 'high' culture with them. Layers are added with each wave of new settlers. The effect of the geography, climate and society of the country influences the practitioners of the arts. Despite the commercial interests coupled with recent mass media's innovations pervading the world with one world culture, there are still distinct cultural differences that mark countries. And individuals and governments want this identity. They need it to make sense of their existence.

5. The Australian government policy of multiculturalism has encouraged each ethnic group to stay separate when it comes to the arts. It also means there has been little incentive for the government to seriously discuss and make decisions

on what we nurture, respect and teach as the languages of the arts, and our own distinct emblems. I think this will lead to unnecessary divisions and problems in the future. The different cultures can hold on to their pasts as THEIR history, but as a country we need simple, easily-learned expressions of our population's togetherness, too.

6. The very distinctive high culture of the indigenous Australians and Islanders IS the unique backbone of Australian identity. However, it is not easily accessible to white Australians, except as spectators. And not many try to do that. I am yet to see a white Australian tackle indigenous dance with enthusiasm or success, so the idea that we use them as a base for national identity is just too hard.

7. When people travel overseas they are much influenced by the 'culture' of the countries they visit. People who would never, or rarely, visit an art gallery or an ancient building, go to the opera or buy an artefact at home, will do so when they travel overseas. Similarly, visitors to Australia want these things here. The souvenirs people buy represent the country in their memory.

8. 'High' culture preserves the best of the past, describes the present and directs us into the future. 'Low' culture [for want of a better expression] stumbles along in its path.

'Low' culture does the same in a less self-conscious way, whether we like it the direction it takes or not. Australian 'low' culture? The beach and lifesavers, AFL, beer, the bush, the Outback, out there complete with Drizabone and Akubras; rubbishing authority, tradition and 'high' culture, sticking up for the battler, some of them, sometimes. This view of culture also drives our moral and ethical values. In environmental terms, these represent the undergrowth, the ground cover, the pasture that binds the topsoil to the bare bones our land.

But because this cultural code is so diffuse and the citizens so deferential about it, it is very hard for new migrants to copy and learn anything about Australian culture, apart from the anti-establishment aspects. They can't grasp, join in, a national song or a national dance or a national ethic.

If we give all Australians from an early age a variety of 'cultural' languages to use, from sport to dance, and insert a national song and dance in that education, we will create a more cohesive whole.

9. Creative people are sprinkled throughout society, whether they have any education in the arts or not. However, the quality of art produced is less important than the quantity. Involvement of people from all walks of life in the process is more important than the product. It's not to do with being 'the best'. It's not to do with winning and losing. It's to do with learning common languages of all sorts and using them to communicate with each other and share the common experience of living our lives in our country.

Those who, against the odds, chose to spend their lives, eke out their living, in artistic pursuits describing our land and its people, are like the new growth forests, the crops, the parks and gardens.

With the financial advantages that Australia has, we will be doing our land and future generations a grave disservice if we do not teach the young the languages of art that have been developed over many millions of years before us. However un-Australian many think this, the Western classics are our foundation. And a remarkable number of Australians have made their name on the world 'celebrity' list in the arts. Despite our 'low' culture attitude to it, we punch above our weight in 'high' music, theatre, film, literature, visual arts, dance.

The classics are just that: things that have stood the test of time. Art galleries, orchestras and opera companies take generations to build up. They are the old growth forests of the cultural world. Once they are cut down, there is no going back. "Western' classical music is popular around the world. The classics will not die.

[Oddly no doubt] for the people who disagree with retaining these flagship companies, every well-trained classical music teacher has more pupils than they can accommodate. There is an enormous demand for the classics, well-taught.

10. Initial white Australian society was strongly Anglo-Celtic. Like it or not, this is the history of the country we all call home. In trying to cater for all tastes and ethnic groups, we can continue to argue forever on what our national symbols should be.

As vehicles for cohesion I believe we need to adopt a national dance and a national song. For a national song or dance, I don't believe we will get anywhere by trying to compose an amalgam of all ethnicities that have settled here. Neither do I think the right song is Waltzing Matilda. However, I do have some other ideas.

In the meantime, let's venerate the past and teach all generations a choice of classical languages of arts. Then they can choose how they want to express their personal experience of living in the country we call home.

I realise that this submission teeters between what I have termed 'low' and 'high' culture. For someone passionately interested in both ends and in how to do my bit to encourage a happy, well-occupied, peaceful society, that's how life is.