



## Where to from here...after the National Cultural Policy

Julianne Schultz

Currency House Arts and Public Life Breakfast series, 2013

The Tea Room, Queen Victoria Building, Sydney am Wednesday 14 August

It is too early in the morning to be thinking about undressing again, but I want to start by taking off a few hats. Over the past few years it has been my great privilege to be involved in a number of important enterprises in the arts, culture and public policy domains, as Tony has noted in his kind introductory words.

Today though I want to take off those hats and reflect a bit on what I have come to understand about this area. But I do not want anyone to wrongly construe that in doing this I am tying this back to what might be in the particular best interests of the Australian Film TV and Radio School, the ABC or Griffith REVIEW. So those hats are off.

What I want to share with you today are some of the views and perspectives I personally have developed about the place of arts, culture and creativity in the public domain and in the life of the nation, economy, communities and individuals.

My thinking has been influenced by the insights into the cultural economy, political and bureaucratic processes I gained from chairing the reference group for the national cultural policy for the previous minister for arts Simon Crean, the intense immersive experience of the 2020 Summit and the big research project I was involved in with the Centre for Social Impact and Arts Queensland which suggested New Models to make the cultural sector and individual artists more sustainable.

These experiences have made me realise that we need new thinking that draws on the past, learns from other sectors, and approaches the future differently. As both creators and consumers – citizens - of one of the richest countries in the world we have great opportunities to place culture at the centre of our endeavours.

I hope that with these disclaimers it is clear I am not speaking on behalf of anyone else or any other organisation – these are my personal views.

In this election time, when promises are assessed in terms of whether the numbers add up and the response in the polls, the future is sketched with the broadest brush, I don't expect we will hear much about the arts or culture, and if we do it is likely to be couched in terms of not causing offence.

Culture sits as a given in much of the political discussion, it is not owned by one party – and in the land of the fair go can be interpreted in many ways.

Rather than playing to the better angels in our nature much of the political debate is framed by fear and threat, rather than opportunity and possibility. This is a shame. In times of rapid change it is the insights from artists, and those that come from participation in cultural activities, which help people adjust and imagine the future. In a practical sense the cultural economy, and the jobs it generates, will play an important role in this country's economic future – so there is a need to be bold about what it might offer.

My strong view is that by taking culture more seriously, by recognizing the layers of our history, the diversity of our peoples and the potential of our creativity, we might be able to draw strength and insight, produce excellent work, find cultural solutions to intractable problems and areas of economic growth.

I want to take a longer perspective, and suggest we take culture seriously, put it on its own pedestal, and consider innovative ways in which it might help us pursue personal, social, economic and national goals.

My starting point in this strategic overview is drawn from a philosophical position that has great utility. It is this: first we define and then we see.

This is truer than ever. In a noisy cluttered world we all take shortcuts and as a result generally only see what has already been defined, things get done the same way over and over with few variations. But times change, so the challenge is to get the frame right, because unless and until that is done, there will be a mismatch between problem and solution.

It seems to me that this is a big part of the problem in our public discussions about culture, art, creativity, heritage and even identity.

We try to squeeze these big subjects into little boxes, and then tape the boxes up tight and wonder why linkages don't occur, why the whole is not bigger than the sum of its parts.

So we tend to talk about the arts, and then we split that into disciplinary or geographic areas and encourage territorial scrapping; we talk about creative industries and disconnect them from the arts that are their wellspring; we talk about identity and then engage in bitter ideological arguments about what to include rather than accepting the reality of layers that leak into each other; we talk about the big institutions as though they are detached from the small and individual enterprises that feed them; we talk about education and then forget to provide training pathways; we talk about our unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and then try to keep it in the bush; we allow talk about government funding to be considered a gift rather than a means to creative production and longer term sustainability.

These are just some of the dichotomies that bedevil our understanding of, and discussion about, the cultural sector and its intersection with public policy and government.

I think that the problem is that we define the area in which we operate too narrowly and that as a result we sell ourselves short, we allow easy fixes and, like needy children, are disproportionately grateful for any interest or money, no matter how paltry.

It probably goes deep into the national psyche, but we are a bit fearful of the C word. In an earlier time there was concern about culture and totalitarianism, but today what I describe as the cultural economy is big, diverse and robust and stropky – heaven help any politician who thinks she or he can own it.

This nervousness about talking about culture is misplaced. Culture and the desire to create it has been central to life in this country for tens of thousands of years. I would argue that the resolution of some of the most intractable problems will only occur when the solutions match a commonly held perception – and in the land of the fair go that can be interpreted in many ways.

We are now at last becoming more comfortable with the enduring legacies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. But we are still rather diffident about the cultural layers that have accreted since European settlement. This is a shame because it is rich, distinctive and unique and worthy of noting, celebrating and learning from.

The intersection of politics, authority and culture makes us nervous about culture being directed by the state. Quite rightly we want to be agents of our own destiny. None of us want a state run culture, but the state can have an enabling role to help us realise the potential we have in this rich, highly skilled and creative country.

So it is important to define culture in an inclusive way, and to seek excellence, sustainability and opportunities for participation.

There are a number of ways we can think about the cultural sector: from the perspective of the artist and put the creator at its centre; we could follow the money and see how it eddies, pools, stagnates and flows; we could trace the creative process and see where it leads; we could attempt to assess the public value for citizens and trace its legacy and multipliers.

All of these are important, but there is a danger in each of not seeing the forest for the trees.

This was something I learnt in the process of chairing the reference group for the National Cultural Policy and reading the many submissions that were made in response to the draft document. It was an intellectually stimulating experience. Some of this is reflected in the Creative Australia policy launched earlier this year.

Those closely involved in that process share my view that the policy is just the beginning of a much bigger project – and indeed it is couched as a ten-year

project. Whether that is ever realized remains to be seen, but the platform for a different discussion has begun to be built.

So let me share with you some of the take-outs that stay with me from the vantage point I had and the meta level perspectives that inform the goals and the programs, rather than the programmatic detail of what is in the policy.

The first is that culture has the arts at its heart, but is something bigger, more encompassing and bolder. As the policy noted:

Culture is created by us and defines us. It is the embodiment of the distinctive values, traditions and beliefs that make being Australian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century unique – democratic, diverse, adaptive and grounded in the world's oldest living civilisation. Australian culture has a firm base in heritage and tradition. It is also dynamic, evolving in response to a changing world and the increasing diversity of those who call this country home. Culture is expressed in many ways through the way we live, speak, conduct public life, relate to others, celebrate and remember the past, entertain ourselves and imagine the future. In sum this captures the Australian spirit – a distinctive way of being that others recognise. Australian identity has a common core, but is not singular. Culture is more than the arts, but the arts play a unique and central role in its development and expression.

My conclusion is that culture is one of the key pillars of any successful society or civilization. We tend to ignore the role of culture, but it is no less important than the other areas which we discuss ad infinitum in the public domain: land and resources; people and their education and capacity; the institutions that provide legal, economic and political. Culture is the glue but is itself an essential pillar.

Second participation in culture, as a creator and consumer, is a human right. It is not a gift to be given or withheld, it is not an optional extra. Australia is a signatory to a number of international conventions that spell this out. In these times 'rights' talk has gone out of fashion, but it is the bedrock that legitimizes the role of government, and the public money that flows into this domain. We need to activate and celebrate this, not apologise for it or ignore it.

Third, governments do not make culture, or even the cultural economy. At best they can enable it through strategic and targeted interventions, through providing financial support, by ensuring a regulatory framework that is appropriate and not an obstacle, by compensating for market failure, by seeding innovation, by recognizing that in this domain the public value may not be simply equated with commercial value. There are a relatively small number of effective public policy levers but probably more than we have traditionally considered.

Fourth, culture is not something that is the preserve of the Office for the Arts, or the Australia Council, or the state arts departments, important though they are. Creation and participation in culture is an important, if often invisible or under-resourced element of almost every government department, from the obvious areas of education, Indigenous affairs, communications, trade and tourism, industry, health, foreign affairs and even defence. This means there are many

more points of intersection than is captured in the small budgets of the funding agencies.

Culture is complex and multifaceted. The language of biology has been co-opted to describe it as an ecosystem. This is not technically correct, but I think we all understand what it means, that in the old ditty, the knee bone is connected to the leg bone is connected to the hip-bone. So it is in culture, creativity and the arts. There is an interconnectedness that can make things seem complex and hard to measure, but not impossible. This brings me to my fifth take out. For all its complexity and interrelatedness, it is possible to define the cultural economy and its interrelated sectors.

My sixth and final lesson was about the importance of measurement. For very good reasons we have been diffident about measuring the value of culture and art. It feels wrong in many ways. We have accepted as a mantra that there are some things that are so intrinsically valuable that they defy quantification. I am not unsympathetic to that view. Robert Kennedy expressed it with great eloquence many years ago, when he decried that we know measure the value of everything except that which is most valuable. In the intervening decades new ways of measuring some of these things of value have been created – it is important to remember that measurement is a human construct. In the arts and culture sector we have opted for a proxy measure of value, the number of tickets sold, the number of visitors and their multipliers, the profitability of organisations and so on. These are important tools, but not sufficient to capture the public value that accrues from engagement in cultural activities. By analogy, thirty years ago environmental value was not something that was measured, now it is. We have to be more ambitious and smarter in finding a way to measure the public value of culture. We know it exists, but we have not yet found the right way to measure it.

We also have to be more ambitious in measuring the intrinsic value of the work produced by artists and the costs that fall disproportionately on them and their families because their work is not properly valued; the institutional in terms of a national ethos which draws visitors or inspires productive innovation; the instrumental value, like the well documented legacy for children of exposure and involvement in arts and culture to successful and engaged lives, and the commercial value which is contributing more to the national economy than many other sectors.

These six things are in keeping with the five goals of the national cultural policy which as you will recall address the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to the uniqueness of this country; recognise diversity and the right to participate; reiterate the importance of excellence and the role of the artist; build capacity to contribute to national life and the economy and ensure an outward-looking, technologically innovative approach.

As a first step the policy then focused on the arts. This redressed an imbalance that has been growing for years –the reorganization of the Australia Council and the creation of Creative Partnerships, the additional funds and the allocation of money from other departments are very important first steps. As is the fact that the Australian Bureau of Statistics has put out a paper on developing a data set

for the arts and culture. The whole of government perspective was important, but will take a while to be realized.

So now I want to step away from the process and try to think a bit strategically about this I think that there are a number of things that need to be done to ensure that we realise all the benefits that there are available in strengthening the culture as one of the key pillars of a successful society.

I am only talking about the public policy levers – because fortunately the creation of arts and culture happens organically. It is just that if we get the role of the state right we could do so much more.

So my personal conclusion is that rather than talking about a whole of government model, and depending on goodwill of bureaucrats and persuasiveness of the minister, we need to make it real.

I think it is time to end having arts tacked on to another ministry. Over the past few years the Office for the Arts, and the excellent and dedicated public servants who work there, have migrated from Communications, to Environment and Heritage, to PMC, to Regional Affairs, back to Environment and now to Immigration. At each point bodies have been lost, corporate memory dissipated and staff kept busy managing the programs they administer and expectations of the minister. They have done well, but with more resources and capacity, could do more.

Allowing the arts to be the suffix of another much bigger department may make sense if the arts were a small bit of icing on the cake of national life, as was once the case. But the cultural economy is now significant; it reaches into everyone's life every day, so this is no longer sufficient. Similarly depending on the personal commitment and interest of the minister is good, but not sufficient. It runs the risk of maintaining a patronage model, which rarely transcends subsistence. Culture, the arts and creativity now a serious part of the economy and deserve to be treated as such.

Most other countries, including those we most like to equate ourselves with, have a Ministry of Culture. Of course there are variations in the nomenclature – Cambodia, Honduras, South Africa, Singapore and Northern Ireland pair arts and culture. A handful of countries have ministries for culture and religion (Norway) or culture and Islamic guidance (Iran), or culture and tourism (Greece, Ethiopia, Ontario, Vietnam, South Korea) some like India, The Netherlands and Indonesia put culture and education together, in New Zealand and Canada it is paired with heritage, in Britain with media and sport and in Japan with sport, science and education. Most simply have a Ministry for Culture.

I think that this is an extremely good idea and maybe a way of reframing the discussion. A Ministry for Culture that aggregates all the areas of arts and cultural activity in one portfolio, under a Cabinet level minister could be transformative. This would make it easier to find linkages between programs and ensure that the not inconsiderable amount of money allocated in this domain was managed in a way that encouraged connections and ensured measurable outcomes.

At the moment not even all the national collecting institutions answer to the same minister, heritage is in environment, cultural diplomacy and UNESCO are in DFAT, industry assistance for the creative industries is in innovation and climate change, tourism and sport are elsewhere, trade is not linked in any consistent way, broadcasting is in broadband and the digital economy, there are programs in education and health, and regional affairs funds the building cultural facilities and gives prizes for regional arts.

And this is just the beginning. There are cultural activities and arts programs in immigration, Indigenous, communities and other departments – even defence spends hundreds of millions a year on cultural activities.

So this is a domain that is considerably bigger than we see if we just look at the allocations for core arts activities. Pulling them together would signal that this was important economically and socially. We already know that this sector is bigger than agriculture and electricity, that the jobs are growing faster than in many other sectors.

Culture will be a plank of the economic future of the country, so when we are reflecting on what the new economy might look like, it is good time to seek to maximize it.

If there were a Minister for Culture these activities could be aggregated. It would mean that the department would be bigger and better resourced, and not in the territorial imperatives of competing departments and ministers. It would mean that the links between programs could be better established.

And it would mean that the pressure would be on to find more robust forms of measurement. It would signal that the government took its responsibilities for culture seriously and recognized its potential both at home and abroad.

One of the accepted tools of government policy-making is to measure impact. In response to changing priorities over the years new policy proposals going to Cabinet have had to have impact statements relating to women, small business, environment and so on. The task of assessing the impact is designed not just to capture information and account for consequences – but to send a signal that this is important.

The recent ABS discussion paper on this is an important step, as is the Chief Scientist's review of the capacity in humanities and social sciences.

I have argued there is a case to be made for measuring the cultural impact of new policy proposals. Two examples come to mind, the first was the introduction of the NBN, if the cultural impact and possibilities had been factored in at the beginning of that process the game of catch up that has followed might have been avoided and the potential of the platform for cultural activities better realized; similarly the architects have argued that had the potential of good design had been recognized at the beginning of the building the education revolution program it is likely that buildings that drew on the best knowledge of the impact of design on the learning process might have been built in more than a handful of schools.

I know those in Canberra who are responsible for developing new policy proposals throw their hands up at such a suggestion – they do not want another layer, another series of boxes to check and I can emphasize with them on this. But I think that building a cultural impact statement into the policy process would be revealing and useful. It would force the development of more effective tools of measurement – as has happened with environmental impact statements - which will be needed if this is to be persuasive and enduring.

It would seem to me that from a national government perspective there is a cultural dimension in the changing nature of Australian society thanks to the massive migration program of the past decade; a cultural dimension that is more than window dressing in relation to the Asian Century; a cultural dimension to innovation in the economy and education; and a crucial cultural dimension in terms of relations with the First Peoples. Tapping into this is important – and may help provide pathways to resolving what seem to be intractable problems – cultural solutions as Wesley Enoch called them.

My concern is that as long as the arts is seen as an optional extra that is nice to have, its potential to impact on these big mainstream areas of government, will be funded accordingly. That is, with not very much money, dependent on the persuasiveness of the minister of the day.

The big economic ministries understand this, and are skeptical about the ability to account for the public value of arts and culture. Excuse my cynicism, but I think there may be a concern that if the data stacks up, it may mean cutting elsewhere – we need to remember that the notion of arts as a gift makes the giver feel good as well.

I concede that this is a rather circular.

In think though that there is an argument for putting all the cultural activities of government together in one department, a Ministry for Culture. It would not be huge, but it would not be inconsequential either. It could include arts, sport, heritage, national collecting and training institutions, broadcasting, screen, tourism, science as its core elements. It would need to have strong links to education, industry, trade, foreign affairs, Indigenous, communities, immigration, regional affairs, digital economy, defence and health. It would need a Cabinet level minister and a skilled and effective head of department with deep connections across the bureaucracy.

Such a department would be able to address the cultural sector as a whole, bring a fresh and critical perspective to the sustainability of the component parts with rigorous economic analysis by taking the lead on developing the tools to measure public value. Its ethos would be sympathetic to cultural potential. It would complement not replicate agencies, like the Australia Council and Screen Australia that allocate funds – so that the arm's length relationship between cultural production and government, which is so important, would be maintained.

It could facilitate links between the big institutions and commercial industries, better understand and address the obstacles to economic sustainability for



individuals and across the patchwork of the cultural economy. It would recognise that this is a growing and increasingly important part of the economy.

In short it would replicate what other departments do in relation to other parts of the economy.

One of the things that has struck me is that we are not good at joining up the links that exist between various public programs. This is not confined to the cultural sector, but because for so long it has been seen as a synonym for arts, public investment does not always realise its potential.

Two examples – a lot of public money that goes into educating young people in the creative arts and creative industries, but there are few training opportunities provided in the public sector that will help turn talented young people into the industry leaders of the future. I understand that training is not a particular priority, but failing to close the circle by requiring publicly funded cultural organisations to take trainees, as happens in other areas of the economy, seems shortsighted. The Asian Century discussion is another case – the report included some references to culture, but it was not really central. The contrast is sharp with other countries in the region. David Pledger described the central role of culture in the modernization of the South Korean economy in his current Platform Paper. He reports that the Koreans realized that by strengthening engagement with Korean culture they would create a platform not just for expression and identity, but for innovation. The Koreans are not alone in this. The recent awards for arts in Asia again underlined the dichotomy here. Clearly there is great work being done by many artists and organisations who take the national priority of engaging with region seriously - but the pathways for public support are not well marked.

There are plenty of related areas in which a Ministry of Culture could usefully engage: innovation, education, social cohesion, tourism, trade, diplomacy and heritage.

We all know that when we visit other countries their heritage is on display. Despite the excellent work done in a handful of galleries and museums we are quite poor at this. We should be finding ways to note and celebrate the layers of heritage in tangible ways – acknowledging the past in a way that inspires people to find out more in a way that speaks to a distinctively Australian sensibility. Sydney City Council is doing a good job in this area, but there is more to be done. Let's keep it local for a minute: Who knows the Aboriginal names of the islands in Sydney Harbour? Who knows that the story of Gurrah the man who was given seven shillings so the gated beach in the eastern suburbs could become private property and named for the coin not him? Why does Captain Flinders' cat Trim have a sculpture at the Library, but not Bungaree the man who accompanied Flinders and who he called the first Australian? Would many of the thousands of people who walk past the fabulous stature of Ben Chifley in the epicenter of commercial banking, Chifley Square, appreciate the irony that he was the prime minister who wanted to nationalize the banks. These all speak to a distinctive Australian sensibility, but remain generally invisible.

I could be wrong, it could be that culture just happens, there is no place for public funding, no need for accountability or seeking to ensure more effective outcomes – but that is not an argument that applies to any other sector of the economy.

So I think it is time to give it a go – to embrace culture as a right available to us as creators and consumers, to put the arts at its centre, to find appropriate ways of measuring the public value that is created, to celebrate our heritage and to recognise that this is the domain in which many of the best and most interesting jobs in the future will be.

Culture is central both to national identity and our economic future. By taking it more seriously we will be better placed to imagine and create a future we want to own.