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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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RE: National Cultural Policy, Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place

Dear Committee Secretary,

We refer to your Committee's Inquiry into the abovementioned recently released National Cultural Policy. We are pleased to offer our views on the Policy from a perspective of a leading regional museum.

About us

But first, let me explain who we are. The Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum (Museum) was started 26 years ago. We are located on the site of the Lithgow Small Arms Factory which opened in June 1912. We exist to preserve, educate and communicate the wonderful work of the Factory, an Australian icon with immense international recognition. The Factory was one of the finest precision engineering and manufacturing establishments in Australia and while it was established for building a sovereign defence capability, its influence radiated world-wide. It was a leader among its peers and what it did had enormous and long-lasting value to Lithgow, NSW and Australia.

The Museum's collection is unique, comprising a vast array of objects and artefacts, with the Museum's archives being recognised by UNESCO for its special Australian history. The Museum is volunteer run, with a Management Committee overseeing strategic and day to day operations.

Our plans are to increase our annual visitations threefold to 25 000 and give longevity to the Museum through acquiring land and buildings and expanding our service offering.

Defining the 'Arts'

As stated, 'the Policy is a five year plan to revive the arts in Australia'. But what constitutes the 'Arts'. It would seem from reading the Policy, it conveys a rather narrow perspective even though the Policy is about culture, people, heritage, stories, significance and education. The mention of 'museums' is but only cursory, despite the fact 'museums' have all the fundamentals underpinning the Policy. It is imperative the Policy defines and

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articulates what comprises 'the Arts'. Moreover, it needs to also give substance to those areas within 'the Arts' that underpin its current and future position. It is here that museums must feature prominently and not be discarded as a minority or non-existent player as it seems the Policy is doing. Museums have and will continue to have pride of place in the nation's cultural dialogue and their significance are in many cases the origins of the stories which the Policy is looking to foster.

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Policy Tenet

In terms of the Policy, we acknowledge and fully support the 'story' concept. Being able to create through exhibits and other means, a compelling dialogue that brings to the fore 'the story', one that is in our case much more than just about culture. What exists today within the Museum is 'a story or in fact stories' of unifying communities, building a strong social fabric, displaying entrepreneurship in engineering and manufacturing, reinforcing the nation's identity, supporting disabilities, going the 'extra mile' in helping fellow Australians, especially during war time and, giving a voice to the working class.

Identifying with the Policy's 'story' theme is not in question. Nor is the proposition 'Revive' since Australia does need a coherent policy espousing and growing a cultural & creatives sector that is vibrant, diverse and has a significance that appeals to local and overseas audiences.

What disappoints us about the Policy is the lack of any recognition of what the museums sector does. While mentioned in passing, with a reference to volunteers, there is hardly any detail or case studies pertinent to the sector. We believe the Policy is far more concerned about the performing arts, entertainment, music, screen and visual arts. It steers the debate and thinking about artistic culture into these defined areas.

If there is to be a national cultural approach, then it must be all encompassing. And in the context of 'a place for every story and a story for everyone', then museums more than most hold such 'stories' which define where we have come from and who we are today. We support the growth of the creatives industry but we do not want to see artistic cultural activities supported simply because they fit a certain 'mindset'. The Policy needs to acknowledge the value that is generated and able to be sustained for the long term.

As a regional museum with some repute, we are not in the 'pockets of Government'. We are a group of committed volunteers who know the significance of our 'stories'. And we tell it in a way that gives our visitors an experience they value highly. Equally, our visitors come from all over Australia and overseas to see our collection, with repeat visitations being commonplace. It is a no-brainer that the National Cultural Policy must embrace museums such as ours if it really is intrinsically committed to growing and raising awareness of the nation's cultural heritage and expression of artistic talent and learning.

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Way forward

The Policy identifies a series of recommendations across five pillars. Two of those pillars are of interest to the Museum.

Pillar 2 – This mentions the Regional Arts Fund, the Regional Precincts and Partnerships program and the National Heritage Trust Fund. Each of these has merit. The Heritage Trust Fund is noted given the need to have longevity in terms of protecting and conserving places where history and significance is at the fore. We would see the Museum site being one such place. Investing in cultural places requires a depth of understanding of what exists and regrettably we find the ‘funding bodies’ have little knowledge of recipient organisations. If ‘stories’ are the glue to bring out the essence of cultural expression, then it is fundamental that funding bodies upskill their knowledge through visiting places, such as the Museum. Providing grants where there is little visibility is fraught with danger.

Pillar 3 – Reference is made to supporting workplace challenges and skills needs with the focus presumably being on ‘commercial’ type activities. But this also should apply to museums. While we (and many others) are volunteer run, the essence of skills is as much of importance to us as it is to other non-volunteer based organisations. As an example, we would welcome the opportunity for regional museums to have ready access to high quality digitisation services relevant to our needs. There is no body locally (within Lithgow or Blue Mountains or Bathurst) providing this service which could be regionally administered and servicing several museums. Our use of Sydney based companies for such services is not always the best answer. With this type of regional digitisation service, comes skills training. While this is one example only, our Museum has many skills needs which in regions can be difficult to recruit.

We note Trove is not referenced in the Policy which is surprising given it holds the most extensive collection of source reference material which goes to the heart of our cultural history and significant educational value. We are very much concerned about the disturbing series of events which is placing Trove not only in financial distress but also being left behind with its less than satisfactory digital platforms. Operated by National Library of Australia (NLA), we understand ongoing funding for Trove is not secure. Trove, with its vast digital content, is for the national good. We understand Trove’s website receives more than 22 million visits per month, clearly demonstrating the demand not only from historians and researchers but more so, the Australian public. It is an essential tool in the finding of source information and materials. We urge the Federal Government to put in place a credible, long-term funding plan for NLA in its management of Trove, including making it a world-leading platform that continues and expands its outreach. Australia cannot afford to see Trove slide into the abyss.

Being a volunteer-based organisation we believe the Policy should have a reflection on volunteers and how they as individuals can be assisted. The current Policy fails to address this. It is a big issue for the cultural / creatives sector. There is no coordination or even



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baseline training - it is left up to the individual organisation to deal with. While we accept this, surely there ought to be courses / training regimes which can be provided free of charge allowing Museums such as ours the ability to put volunteers through various training programs that are mutually beneficial.

Finally, we note the Policy has only a 5-year timeline, thus potentially jeopardising continuity. 'Storylines' do not have timelines. While nothing is certain, a Policy of this nature in terms of logistical planning, mobilisation, funding, legislative support and audience uptake would need a much longer time horizon with defined outcomes. We would like to see the Policy implementation done in a staged fashion, with clear markers defining progress at each stage. The current approach has a long list of actions which do not seem to have any linkages or interdependencies. And as a result, any progress could be difficult to measure.

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We thank the Committee for the opportunity to respond and would be pleased to provide any additional information on any of the points raised or on any other matter.

Yours sincerely

Renzo Benedet
Secretary