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# A NEW APPROACH

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## ***Opening Statement to Select Committee on COVID-19, 30 June 2020***

Today is focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the arts and cultural industries. But I want us to be clear from the outset that the impact is not just on the sector, it is on people from all states and territories, from the country and the city, from the outer suburbs and the inner, and from all walks of life.

These people, right across the country, think that opportunities to participate in arts and culture are essential to the Australian way of life. How do we know this?

Early this year, A New Approach completed focus groups about arts and culture with 'middle Australians,' defined as middle-aged, middle income, swinging voters from suburban and regional Australia. These were discussions between forklift drivers, hairdressers and sports administrators, in predominately marginal federal electorates, in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales.

They were asked what would Australia be like without arts and culture? They answered:

- '...without imagination or creativity, life would be horrible, no freedom of expression...' (*Male, Melbourne*)
- '...people get mental health issues.' (*Female, Brisbane*)
- 'There would definitely be an increase in drugs here.' (*Male, Townsville*)
- '...sterile. Boring. Controlled. It'd be a more tense society.' (*Male, Sydney*)
- 'You may as well live on Mars.' (*Female, Sydney*)

This cohort expect governments to foster arts and culture by helping Australia tell its many stories, supporting events that bring people together and in making arts and cultural opportunities accessible.

This enthusiasm is backed up ABS data on cultural participation rates and household expenditure that shows we are keen participants in the cultural life of the nation. This broad relevance is why we are calling for the development of a National Arts and Culture Plan, modelled on the Sports 2030 plan, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made this more urgent.

I'd ask that the Committee members, as they are listening today, remember that this is about ensuring we have a rich and varied arts and cultural life with relevance and strength into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Otherwise, we may as well live on Mars.

*Kate Fielding, Program Director of A New Approach, an independent think tank championing effective investment and return in arts and culture in Australia.*