

Submission to Senate Inquiry into National Cultural Policy

For a Cultural Policy that engages deeply with the world as it is and could be

Submission by Tim Hollo

I make this submission in my individual capacity, both as a practising artist and as an advocate for social justice and ecological sensitivity and sensibility.

As a musician with FourPlay String Quartet, I have recorded seven albums and toured nationally and internationally. Over a career spanning some 30 years, I have performed in venues from suburban pubs and clubs to New York's Carnegie Hall, from local community festivals to The Big Day Out. I've recorded and performed backing strings with countless artists, which has given me insight into the diverse lives of musicians in Australia from the 1990s to now. In 2022, I was elected to the National Council of MEAA, representing the musicians' section, but emphasise that these ideas are my views and not intended as reflecting those of the union.

In 2013, I founded Green Music Australia, an NGO working to support musicians and the music scene to reduce our environmental impact and lead the way to a greener world. Through establishing and running the organisation, I discovered deep hunger in the music scene for guidance and support to green up its act, as well as the tremendous difficulty many find in doing so. I remain on the board of Green Music Australia, but this submission is not intended to reflect the views of the organisation.

I am also Executive Director of The Green Institute, in which capacity I have researched and published on Universal Basic Income, as well as sector-based living wages schemes, and engaged in the lengthy creative process of writing a book.

I live, and usually work, on the land of the Ngunnawal people, in Canberra.

This submission highlights two major gaps in the National Cultural Policy: the complete absence of any engagement with the climate and ecological crises, and the very narrow conception of how to support the artist as worker. It proposes to fill those gaps through:

- Support for artists and arts institutions to engage deeply with the climate and ecological crisis, both in creative work and in practical approaches; and
- The introduction of an Artists' Living Wage, explicitly acknowledging that artistic practice is valuable work that goes well beyond the sale of products or performances.

Introductory remarks

Art – making, participating in, and enjoying art – is vital to who we are as humans. Art helps us understand ourselves, each other, and the society which binds us together. Art is, for many people, a primary way we think about our interdependence with each other. It can scare us, it can confront us, and it can simply give us a good time. Without it, we would not be human. Through it, we can access the sublime, the ‘more-than-human’.

This submission is not intended as a holistic response to the National Cultural Policy, or the broad array of challenges and opportunities facing the arts and artists in Australia. Although, parenthetically, I do wish to welcome the Centre for Arts and Entertainment Workplaces, as a vital step to ensuring safer conditions and appropriate standards of behaviour in the sector, and encourage the government to ensure union involvement in the Centre.

Instead of a broad response, this submission highlights two major gaps in the National Cultural Policy, and proposes specific interventions in those spaces that I see as crucial for confronting the challenges and opportunities facing the arts and artists in the 21st century: firstly, how we understand the particular role of arts and artists in responding to the climate and ecological crisis, and secondly how we more effectively value – and pay for – the true work of artists in a 21st century economy.

These should be seen as foundational questions in grappling with a National Cultural Policy fit for the second quarter of the 21st century.

Engaging with the climate and ecological crisis

It is now widely understood, by the Australian population at large, by artists and cultural practitioners, and by the Australian government, that we are facing a truly existential crisis in not only planetary heating but also the broader destruction of our natural world, through pollution and biodiversity loss. Addressing this ecological crisis is a central challenge for all of us, both practically and culturally, and not least for artists and arts organisations. Indeed, the impact of climate change-induced extreme weather is already being felt by music festivals (<https://theconversation.com/climate-change-is-transforming-australias-cultural-life-so-why-isnt-it-mentioned-in-the-new-national-cultural-policy-198881>), struggling in the aftermath of Covid.

Given the centrality of the climate crisis to contemporary political and social debate, it is extraordinary that the updated cultural policy completely ignores the role of arts and artists in engaging with the climate and ecological crisis.

That role exists both in our creative work, telling the stories that help us come to terms with what is happening and what we can do, as well as in very practical terms, learning how to reduce our environmental impact to ensure that we, and our art, can survive. For a detailed

exploration of this role, see Hollo, Tim & Rimmer, Matthew (2014) *Key change: The role of the creative industries in climate change action*, Australian National University, College of Law, Australia (<https://eprints.qut.edu.au/91201/>).

In establishing Green Music Australia (www.greenmusic.org.au), it swiftly became clear to me that there is a strong desire among musicians, artist managers, music festival organisers, and music fans to engage deeply with the climate and ecological crisis, both creatively and practically. However, for the vast majority this is still seen as more of a challenge than an opportunity, throwing up new hurdles in an already extremely difficult environment. People across the music scene would love to reduce their impact, but have neither the time nor financial flexibility to take what is seen as a risk or to work out how to do something differently. Similarly, they would love to make art which grapples with the crisis, but also see that as a risk.

It is crucial that the National Cultural Policy be updated and expanded to support artists and arts organisations to engage with the climate and ecological crisis in the same way that government should be supporting all sectors to transition in the light of this crisis. Importantly, there are excellent examples to follow in this space.

With the support and engagement of arts sustainability organisation, Julie's Bicycle, **Arts Council England** has established a detailed Environmental Programme (<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/environmental-programme>) encompassing advice, support, guidelines and grants. There is a wealth of materials and expertise to draw on here. Closer to home, **Creative Victoria** has included sustainability advice in recent how-to guides and supported the development of Green Music Australia's *Sound Country* "green artist guide" (<https://www.greenmusic.org.au/soundcountry>).

Taking this lead, the government should, after wide consultation, investigate the development of a comprehensive Environmental Program to be housed within the new Creative Australia or the Office for the Arts to support and manage activities such as:

- establishing a well-funded advisory body to support Australian artists and arts organisations in reducing their environmental impact (or supporting NGOs like Green Music Australia and ClimARTe to provide such advice);
- introducing requirements and support for major funded arts organisations to account for and begin to reduce their environmental impact;
- phasing in a requirement for all arts organisations to progressively reduce their environmental impact, with government support (both advisory and financial); and
- offering a range of grant programs to artists to develop works and practices which engage with the climate and ecological crisis.

An Artists' Living Wage

Art is work. It's hard work. It's crucial work. Without properly valued and supported artists creating new and old art, challenging and joyous art, diverse art, our society would swiftly cease to function well, as everyone needs to engage with art. It is hugely welcome that the National Cultural Policy recognises this fact so explicitly.

However, in recognising the artist as worker, the policy fails to understand what artistic work actually is – seeing it through a commercial lens of creation of product for sale. This failure leads to a far too narrow response to the question of how to deal with the widespread poverty amongst artists that leads so many to abandon the arts and seek paid employment elsewhere.

Art is practice. Arts work is practice. Whether it's building technique, experimenting, or rehearsing, the work of being an artist is immeasurably greater than the points of direct engagement with the market economy – ticket sales to performances, sales of products, royalties for reproduction or broadcast, etc – which are currently the primary way in which artists are paid for our work.

Factoring in this behind-the-scenes work is what lies behind efforts to increase the fairness of royalty payments, local content quotas, creative development grants, and of course the proposed minimum set fee for musicians being promoted by Musicians Australia and the MEAA. It is welcome that the National Cultural Policy adopts the minimum set fee for direct Commonwealth-funded performances, but this will impact only a tiny number of performances and in no way addresses the rampant underpayment, or non-payment, of musicians.

While I strongly endorse the minimum fee, fairer royalties, content quotas and more, in the current global environment, both economic and societal, we need to appreciate that these can only be partially successful. In the online world of global streaming giants and infinite replication, relying on royalties and record sales – always precarious – has become impossible. Minimum set fees, and other measures to improve payment for performances, cannot provide security in a world where a pandemic can shut down venues and festivals with little or no warning. Grants programs, by definition, can only support a tiny minority of artists.

It has long been the case that artists have had to work multiple, precarious, non-arts jobs in order to support their arts practice. In recent years, with reliable income from arts work becoming even more limited, and with the cost of living increasing, huge numbers of Australians are leaving the arts altogether, committing to such work as they can get elsewhere, unwilling or unable to continue their practice while living in poverty.

If we truly seek, as the existing National Cultural Policy would have us do, to ensure that “artists and arts workers have career structures that are long-term and sustainable, supported by vocational pathways” and that “creative talent is nurtured through fair remuneration, industry standards and safe and inclusive work cultures”, then we need to pay people to be artists.

The best and simplest way to pay people to be artists is through an Artists’ Living Wage, some form of regular basic payment for those who can demonstrate their engagement in ongoing arts practice.

An excellent model of this approach is currently in place in Ireland, a country which deeply values its artists. Ireland has for some years had policies such as income tax exemptions for artists. In addition to this, it has recently begun a basic income pilot paying €325 a week to 2,000 eligible artists and arts workers for a period of 3 years (https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment_and_redundancy/employment_support_schemes/basic_income_arts.html).

The Australian Greens have proposed a similar program, an Artists’ Wage, that would pay 10,000 Australian artists \$772.60 per week for a year to enable them to pursue their arts practice (<https://greens.org.au/news/media-release/greens-colour-australia-artists-wage-pilot-program-sustain-creatives>).

A widely accessible regular payment, conditional only on demonstration of ongoing artistic practice, would be a powerful way to ensure that Australian artists can continue their socially vital practice, understanding its value to be far beyond the sale of products or performances.