

SUBMISSION

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER

21 October 2011

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies is the umbrella body for Australia's more than 1000 community history and heritage societies and around 100,000 members.

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies (FAHS) strongly supports the development of a new National Cultural Policy for Australia. We believe such a National Cultural Policy should contextualise our history and heritage so that our past may be illuminated in our cultural activities. We feel that the policy should address our history, the arts, cultural and creative endeavours.

The study and publication of history in the community contributes substantially to Australian culture by building an inclusive society, providing educational opportunities, and contributing to productivity. A National Cultural Policy provides the opportunity to promote history and cultural heritage as central to expressions of Australian cultural identity.

We note that the Minister speaks of 'arts, cultural and creative endeavours' and urge the inclusion specifically of 'the study and publication of history' as a cultural and creative endeavour. Furthermore we urge the inclusion of the word, 'cultural', along with 'arts and creative industries' so that the purpose of the policy is not lost or becomes too restrictive. We urge that a generally accepted definition of 'culture' be included such as 'The totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.' It is also a serious oversight in the discussion paper not to have included 'cultural heritage'. We believe (for reasons stated below) that aspects of cultural heritage to be recognised should include historiography and interpretation of heritage sites as they are creative arts in themselves. These activities should receive 'strong recognition' and support to a similar extent that creative dramatic arts are to be given recognition. This should include the creative activities

undertaken by professional and amateur historians, historical societies and likeminded organisations who care for and interpret the distributed national heritage collection.

History inspires discussion about Australia's national identity, complementing and informing the dramatic arts, music, crafts and painting. History requires the observance and location of data that supports an opinion which can be placed in an account of how or why something developed or did not do so. History requires close regard to records of any sort which support an interpretation of events. Indigenous history will be more likely to be oral. Non-indigenous history is more likely to derive from a written record. For each of them the development of the National Broadband Network will be vitally important.

The development of a new National Curriculum will specifically target teaching of history which will stimulate an interest in some young Australians in the history of their nation and community. The Curriculum, like the Network, will heighten interest in the lessons of oral and non-oral history.

Indigenous people are likely to be prompted by these developments to seeking to tell the story of their community as they have heard it over the years. The motive to Tell Your Own Story is a strong one and writing and interpreting history will attract acceptance because of its apparent accuracy. Such writing is creative and interpretive. The use of the word, 'literature', is too restrictive as it does not recognize the creativity in the writing of history.

GOALS FOR NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY AS SET OUT IN THE DISCUSSION PAPER

Developing a Vision for Australia's Future

It is correct that 'cultural policy needs to reflect the complex and diverse ways in which Australians take part in arts and creative activity...' It clearly needs to encompass the work of professional and amateur historians whether working in the public record or privately held materials. History is a skill which involves 'an education which develops the tools to think critically and creatively...'

Goal 1: What the Government supports

History is one of the best areas to involve more people wanting to understand their environment and to give an account of it. This is borne out by the increased volume of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous writing in the last decade or so. Digitisation of such materials and their presentation in the context of supporting oral or non-oral materials could be very attractive to developing interest where engagement in the arts has been low.

Goal 2: Emerging technologies and new ideas

History is entirely suited to being presented by the new methods of communication.

Goal 3: Strengthening ... telling Australian stories...

Academic Faculties or Departments in History are not blessed with a level of funding which ensures they will participate in the strategies of this goal. Likewise, Historical Societies operate mostly on private funds, these being barely enough for essential maintenance of important

historical records. Incentives could be provided to both and to individuals in them to break new ground.

Goal 4: Strengthen the capacity to contribute to our Society and Economy

Use the strategies proposed and ensure that the world of history is involved.

Additional context:

There is no reason that Australian history cannot compete on the world stage, and to some degree some of it already does so. History and its cultural outputs would increase considerably if it was supported and developed in the global environment.

There is also no reason why history as part of the cultural effort could not adapt to a new generation of users with new technology and tools.

History is one of the most important ways in which the stories of indigenous culture and multicultural policy can be told and transmitted into the Australian culture.

History, outside University Faculties and Departments, makes its contribution through an astonishing level of volunteer contribution. It has a heavy reliance on unpaid work. Yet the task of conservation of documents, photographs and other materials is simply overwhelming and desperately needs public support. It is from those materials that the cultural interpretations can and will arise.

History also has more to contribute for cultural and heritage visitors. Both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous history have a great attraction for such visitors. Each display and cultural interpretation requires considerable funding and support to match the level of public interest.

It is said that Australia needs to target new, younger audiences. Experience in one of the Historical Societies in Western Australia is that two young members, using new computer techniques, have contacted and created a membership for the Society far beyond what would otherwise have occurred.

Under ‘Social Impact’ it is said that there should be capacities for critical inquiry, lateral thinking, innovative solutions and powerful communication. In our view, this is what historians and history are involved in doing. Not only must the historian examine the evidence (oral or non-oral) critically, but also must think laterally in the context of earlier studies. This can lead to innovative interpretations and re-interpretations of important elements of Australian history. The writing of history is a vital part of creativity and cultural achievement.

FUNDING

As to the suite of funding programs, it cannot be said that history is in any significant sense endowed by the public purse. It is an important element of cultural achievement.

As to digitisation of collections, the history world is about to have available on line vastly increased access to federal and state records. A high proportion of these are held by Historical

Societies outside the public record. This new access will enable members of the public to research or to visit places which may be of interest to them.

As to the key components of Government investment, it is not obvious that bodies responsible for collection and maintenance of historical records feature at all in the spectrum of funding. The National Archives would be one exception and possibly the Museum of Australian Democracy.

A NATIONAL COLLECTIONS COUNCIL or DISTRIBUTED COLLECTIONS COUNCIL

One of the missing elements in Australia's cultural heritage regime is a body responsible for maintaining an overview and connection between the thousands of collections of cultural heritage materials that form the 'distributed national collection' – the diverse collections are held by government institutions, community organisations, commercial organisations and even private individuals. Leaving aside art collections (which may be judged to be in a separate category and are already well endowed and relatively well cared for, from a cultural heritage collection perspective), besides historical and heritage collections of documents and objects, these collections include libraries, and government and business archives.

Since the demise of the Collections Council of Australia there is no overall body to assist with recognition, guidance and training of people and organisations responsible for parts of the Distributed National Collection.

Until the establishment of the Collections Council of Australia there was no such authority. The CCA had many critics, but a substantial proportion of its problems can be attributed to its funding structure, budgetary limitations and awkward administrative arrangements. Within these parameters it developed Significance 2.0 (a methodology for identifying significance of objects in collections) and fostered Blue Shield Australia for assisting organisations after disasters. Its loss is widely regretted.

The FAHS supports the establishment of a revised version of the CCA, perhaps named the Distributed Collections Council.

Based within the Arts Ministry it could be modelled on the Australian Heritage Council – with up to ten stakeholders and people with experience across the collections sector, headed by a Chair and with administrative support from within the Department.

Responsibilities:

- provide Australian government leadership in identifying the significance of collections and encouragement of best practice;
- assist in pooling of professional expertise, advice and guidance;
- administration of a small grants programme; and

- response to collections under threat – such as the recent spate of libraries disposing of large sections of their collection in favour of electronic data retention.

MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

In the recent reorganisation of COAG Ministerial Committees, the Ministerial Committee and Secretariat responsible for Cultural Heritage was disbanded.

The loss of the Cultural Ministers Council undermines national coordination in such matters as the consultation and advice on the Distributed National Collection. Its loss implies a substantial downgrading of the significance of Cultural Heritage.

FAHS wishes to impress upon the government the significance of re-establishing a Ministerial Council with relevant responsibilities – or to incorporate these responsibilities into one of the revised Councils.

A National Cultural Policy would be aided by the establishment of a Ministerial Council with full authority.

CULTURAL COLLECTIONS CATALOGUING SOFTWARE

At present there are numerous commercial and semi-commercial forms of cataloguing software available for historical societies and heritage and other types of community museums. FAHS has undertaken an informal survey which shows that while there is a diversity of software available, there is much dissatisfaction with their effectiveness and cost.

FAHS recommend that as part of the NCP there should be funding for the development of a nationally available software system that will allow better portability and coordination between collections.

TRAINING

One of the great needs of community heritage organisations is training of their volunteers.

Training is required in such areas as:

Computer and web services – cataloguing and digitising collections, creation and maintenance of informative and interactive websites, information for heritage tourists; conservation and preservation of historic materials – documents, images and objects; preparing grant applications; working with other organisations such as local councils, heritage bodies and schools; copyright issues; and exhibition practices.

Volunteers

The economic value of the work of volunteers in historical societies in Australia is enormous. The Federation estimates that historical societies alone provide more than \$30 million per annum of voluntary labour to the collection, preservation, recording and exhibition of our national cultural heritage.

Historical societies undertake thousands of hours per year of voluntary work promoting regions to Australian and international tourists. Volunteers at Historical Societies invest their social capital into the local community. This role is extremely valuable in uplifting cultural values locally and the mental and physical health of the volunteers. This has already been demonstrated in social policies in the United Kingdom, North America and is now being recognised in Australia.

The not-for-profit sector including historical societies is a very cost effective provider of community services including promotion and conservation of the nation's cultural heritage. This community involvement also provides a framework for community education in cultural heritage values.

Provision of tools for incorporating social capital considerations into policy analysis by governments is essential.

Community cultural heritage societies and museums rely heavily upon volunteers. Volunteerism is recognised for its wider social benefits through its contribution to a sense of community strengthening and individual wellbeing. Many community organisations operate in small and rural communities where such values are particularly important. The Productivity Commission noted the value of volunteerism in building social capital in a 2003 research paper.¹

It is difficult to estimate the value of the financial contribution to the Australian economy that is made by voluntary heritage organisations. However, a basic estimate by the FAHS and ACNT in 2010 indicated that the built assets that they own and occupy are worth perhaps \$300 million, their movable cultural heritage assets (potentially about 3 million in number) are worth perhaps \$130 million and their volunteer labour contributes an estimated \$36.6 million per annum.

It is difficult to place a figure on their contribution to heritage tourism in Australia, but as indicated by the research of Cegielski et al, it amounts to many millions.²

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies Inc represents an estimated 100,000 members. The vast majority of historical and heritage societies own or occupy premises, and a high proportion of these are heritage buildings. It is estimated that the value of the buildings owned and occupied by historical societies and the National Trust would be at least \$300 million.

¹ Productivity Commission, *Social Capital: Reviewing the Concept and its Policy Implications*, Research Paper, Canberra, 2003

² Michele Cegielski, Ben Janeczko, Trevor Mules and Josette Wells, *Economic Value of Tourism to Places of Cultural Heritage Significance: A Case Study of Three Towns with Mining Heritage*, CRC for Sustainable Tourism, University of Canberra, 2005

The vast majority of historical societies have movable cultural heritage collections (documents, images, artefacts, ephemera) and about half have exhibitions that are open at times to the public and are frequented by heritage tourists.

Virtually all this work is undertaken on a voluntary basis, with minimal external support. Most historical society and historical museum members are aged over 50, and a very high proportion are self-funded retirees or pensioners with a limited income. While the heritage society movement is dollar poor, it is rich in voluntary labour and historical expertise. Members contribute hundreds of thousands of hours to the research, preservation and communication of local, state and national history. Many of these people take advantage of the few relevant training programs provided through state government agencies/universities and are now computerising their catalogues, and among the volunteers are personnel with relevant professional qualifications and experience (e.g. librarians). However, there is still a very large need for training and skill development.

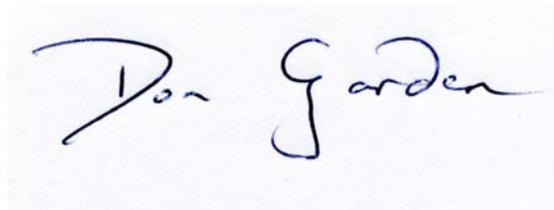
Assuming that the estimated 100,000 members each contributes (very conservatively) an average of one hour of their time per month, valued conservatively at \$25 per hour, this gives a total of about \$30 million per annum.

Without this voluntary contribution, national cultural heritage and social capital in Australia would be very much poorer.

CONCLUSION:

The FAHS strongly supports the development of a National Cultural Policy. It provides a significant opportunity to advocate the centrality of the study of our history and cultural heritage to all facets of Australian life (social, economic, environmental and cultural) and to gain greater support for history and cultural heritage.

We appreciate the opportunity to lodge a submission and welcome the opportunity to meet with the Minister for the Arts, The Honourable Simon Crean MP, and staff at the Office for the Arts to discuss this submission, including the recommended strategies, in greater detail.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Don Garden". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'D' and 'G'.

Associate Professor Don Garden
President