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## What is cultural policy?

Google, like Glad Wrap, is something we didn't know we needed until we got it, and now we've got it we can't do without it. The process of googling can give us insight and information about anything at all. Could it help us to define what is meant by 'cultural policy'? Try it. At last count, entering these words into that seductive rectangular space produced 372,000 hits. Clearly, cultural policy is alive and well, at least in cyberspace. It's doing OK in scholar-space too—a search using the academic version of Google gives around 5,120 hits for 'cultural policy', spanning books and journals in economics, sociology, arts management, cultural studies and political science.

This essay asks what cultural policy is and how policy towards the arts and culture has evolved in Australia over time. The most ambitious attempt to formulate an explicit cultural policy by any federal government was the ALP's *Creative Nation* statement of 1994. I want to discuss the origins of this document and such legacy as it has had, in order to ask whether,

after a decade of the Howard Government, the time is not ripe for a renewed effort to set out a cultural policy for this country. If it is, then what should such a policy look like? To begin with we need to understand what the term ‘cultural policy’ embraces.

Despite the avalanche of information about cultural policy unearthed by Google, defining it remains problematical. Maybe the clearest thing we can say with certainty is that we know what it’s not. No one in an open democratic society such as the one we are supposed to inhabit would see cultural policy as the formal imposition of state culture on the population—that is, a situation in which our political masters tell us what our culture is or should be. This is precisely the situation depicted, for example, in David Pownall’s *Master Class*; at one point in this brilliant play, which is set in the former USSR, Stalin’s Minister for Culture reminds Prokofiev and Shostakovich of the decree handed down by the Central Committee of the Communist Party proclaiming that ‘Soviet composers must become more conscious of their duties to the People and stimulate the kind of creative activity that will lead to higher-quality works being composed which will be worthy of the Soviet people’.<sup>1</sup> This sort of verbally-challenged diktat may work in totalitarian regimes of both right and left, but not here.

If we look to other countries’ cultural policies as an aid to definition, we find considerable variations around the world. Here are just three examples.<sup>2</sup> First, the Canadian Government has described its cultural policy in the following terms:

Canada’s cultural fabric has been shaped by a small and geographically dispersed population, limited

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economies of scale and high costs of production, the ubiquitous proximity and presence of the United States of America (the world's largest and most influential cultural super-power) and a unique blend of multicultural demographics, official linguistic duality (French and English) and diverse Aboriginal cultures. The development of a national cultural policy for Canada by the federal government has therefore been shaped largely by the need to protect and affirm Canadian cultural sovereignty and to promote national unity and a Canadian identity.

The second example is from France, where the history of cultural policy from its origins under royal patronage until the present day has been marked by the central role played by the State in promoting and organising the idea of French arts, language and culture through the great national cultural institutions, performing companies, academies and government-supported cultural programs. The Ministry of Culture has had fiscal and administrative responsibility for implementation of the national cultural policy which nowadays covers heritage protection, contemporary artistic creation, dissemination and training, and the regulation of cultural industry markets. Finally, in the United Kingdom, cultural policy has been strongly focussed on support for the arts, a deliberate strategy at least since the 1940s. But at a broader level its goals are to increase access to, and participation in, the cultural and sporting life of the nation and to enhance the quality of the experience on offer, cultivating an appetite for excellence. British cultural policy is also directed towards promoting good design, fostering education in the arts and culture, facilitating the role of the arts