

On becoming a culturally proactive nation

Kate Fielding

The time is ripe for a new relationship between Australia and the United Kingdom (UK). Australia has drawn from the UK's civic institutions and a large part of our nation shares your family tree. But like any extended family we have unfinished business and a need for continual renewal of our understanding of each other. In this endeavour, arts and culture can play a powerful role.

Australian arts and culture is unique and enduring, ancient and contemporary. It is embedded in the lives of all Australians. We know this because Australians show it through their actions, participating in arts, cultural and creative activities at a high rate, with more than 82 percent attending venues and events in 2017–18 and households spending AU\$50 each week on cultural expenditure on average.¹

Like the UK, Australia is a successful multicultural liberal democracy. But unlike the UK, it is some people's perception that Australia is only now coming into its full power as a mature, culturally proactive nation.

So what does culturally proactive mean – and are we ready? A New Approach's (ANA) research with middle Australians from right across the country suggests the answer is an emphatic 'yes'. These middle Australians are from low and middle income households in outer suburban and regional areas of Australia and are politically fluid. Our research with them has revealed they are ambitious in their desire for Australian arts and culture to reflect and proactively share a contemporary, confident and true story about 'who we are now'.

"[Arts and culture] is about Australia's identity. Our experiences are quite different to someone who may have lived in England or America, even though culturally we may have some connections with language, there are some distinct differences and I think it's important to celebrate those and express them." (Female, 35–60, New South Wales)

Middle Australians have told us that arts and culture is essential to the Australian way of life, bringing communities together and improving social cohesion. They also know that these activities have a binding effect in the face of disruption and dislocation.

Our middle Australians aged 35–60 felt strongly that support for arts and culture was critical to ensuring adequate representation of Australia 'on the world stage'² Similarly, younger middle Australians aged 18–29 felt that arts and culture has an important role in Australia's future, believing that it can deepen understanding of different people and places while helping to tell Australia's stories to the world.³ They also report using arts and culture as tools to understand themselves and their changing world.

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- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2017. "6530.0 – Household Expenditure Survey, Australia: Summary of Results, 2015-16." Australian Bureau of Statistics: Household Expenditure Survey 2015/16. October 27, 2017. <https://www.abs.gov.au/household-expenditure>.
- 2 Fielding, K., Trembath, J.L., 2020, *A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity*. Produced by A New Approach think tank with lead delivery partner the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.
- 3 Trembath, J.L., Fielding, K., August 2021. *The next generation of voters: Young middle Australians talk arts, culture and creativity*. Insight Series. Paper no. 2021–02. Produced by A New Approach (ANA). Canberra, Australia.

But in building this international reputation, both middle and young middle Australians felt there was an outdated perception of Australia. They were proud of Australia's identity as an open, laid-back, friendly and multicultural society but expressed concerns that other nations didn't understand the diversity of unique experiences that comprise Australian society today:

"I think overseas people, particularly my relatives, think Australia is backward. There is a lot of mis-education out there. And we could definitely improve on how our multiculturalism is presented to the world. The perception is probably quite general and boganish, like Paul Hogan [from Crocodile Dundee]. I think they are trying to change that now, but there needs to be a big shift, a balance." (Male, 35–60, Victoria)

"I think there's so many different experiences of being Australian. It's not one shared, unified thing. It's this whole different range of how people express being Australian, and I think art is a way to express that and build their understanding of what that looks like for people outside of Australia coming into Australia, to get an idea that there's a really diverse range of people here." (Female, 18–35, Northern Territory)

"We are seen as a little bit culturally bereft in this country, we really need stuff like [public arts and cultural activities], especially – Europeans, you know what they think about us? They think about us as a drinking culture. They would like to see more, say, Aboriginal culture." (Male, 35–60, New South Wales)

These beliefs suggest middle Australia will welcome more confident action by government, industry, business and philanthropy to ensure Australia can share a contemporary, nuanced expression of its artistic and cultural riches now and into the future.

The Global Soft Power Index⁴ currently ranks Australia tenth behind soft power 'superpowers' like Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. Being able to draw on Australia's arts and culture is critical to Australia's ability to influence regional and global conversations, respond to societal challenges with innovation, and attract and retain talent. A thriving arts and culture sector also helps to establish new markets and new networks for Australia.

Our work with middle Australians highlights their particular pride in Australia's artistic and cultural strength coming from the entwining of the cultural and creative practices of First Nations peoples with the diverse cultures, histories and languages of twenty-first century Australian communities. This strength is a shared inheritance, both of this land and of many lands.

Australians are ready to share our cultural strength with the world, to meet our peers as competitors as well as our collaborators. This culturally proactive stance can help Australian people, businesses and institutions to speak with confidence about Australia and its ambitions beyond its borders. It can also act as an invitation to others to understand, connect and collaborate with Australia.

Our political and cultural leaders in both the UK and Australia have a gift and a responsibility. We must honour our shared inheritance as well as hearing the creative voices of now who can assist us in navigating our unfinished business. We can harness its power to shape our shared geopolitical future, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. We can work across our national boundaries and our entwined histories to truly understand each other as we are now, and to collaborate on these shared values of creativity, innovation, multiculturalism and vigorous liberal democracy.

It is an invitation that should embolden us all.

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⁴ Brand Directory (2021), "Global Soft Power Index", <https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/> (accessed on 23 December 2021)