

A New Approach (ANA)

‘Becoming a Cultural Powerhouse’

National Press Club Address by Rupert Myer AO, Chair of A New Approach (ANA) and President, The Myer Foundation.

15 November 2023

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this region, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. I also acknowledge other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining today. Always, and even more so in the context of today’s topic, I am deeply grateful for your continuing culture and your contributions to the creative life of Australia.

Thank you, Julie, and to those of you here at the National Press Club, one of Australia’s foremost cultural institutions, and those of you online from all over including, I gather, Thursday Island in the north, Geraldton in the west, Merricks North in the south, from capital cities and many other special places. We gather today to speak about arts, culture and creativity. The topic is *Australia becoming a cultural powerhouse*.

I could not begin this address without acknowledging the death last week of Marc Besen AC. His inspiring cultural philanthropic legacy will live on for generations. I express my sympathies to the entire Besen family.

An Australian Embassy anywhere in the world is, in its very nature, an expression of Australia to the world.

I wish I had been there when the new Australian Embassy in Washington was opened by the Prime Minister just last month. If I had, I’d have been looking at an assured building, designed by Australian architects Bates Smart, clearly differentiated from the surrounding civic architecture.

The building is bold, contemporary, light filled and welcoming, reflecting the distinctive Australian landscape. Embedded throughout the building are artworks by artists who reflect Australia today – First Nations people, migrants

A New Approach (ANA)

and people who've been here for generations. Inside and out, this new Australian Embassy expresses Australia's maturing cultural assertiveness and our desire to share a contemporary cultural identity with the world.

By contrast, 60 years ago, when the same firm designed the original Embassy building in Washington, the brief was to create an architectural presence that looked at home in the United States capital. It was understated and respectful in white masonry to comply with the city's codes so that it merged perfectly into the other international buildings.

We have now changed our style of thinking. From striving to fit in 60 years ago, to now boldly asserting a distinct Australian identity, the contrast between the two buildings tells us much about how Australia now perceives itself.

Today, by some measures, Australia *is* a cultural powerhouse. But we've not yet cemented our place.

If we do, the evidence shows that Australia can have a future in which our people are healthier and happier, our communities are more connected, our nation is more prosperous, and our region is more stable and sustainable.

If we act now.

- We can benefit from our maturing cultural confidence both at home and abroad.
- We can deploy our \$122 billion cultural and creative industries to support the social and economic strategies they directly and positively impact.
- And we can refine and accelerate the process of how we present ourselves to the world and share a contemporary Australian identity.

One of the largest global platforms for presenting our contemporary identity is now less than a decade away. The 2032 Brisbane Olympics and Paralympics is our opportunity to share a new story about Australia. Being nearly one third of a century on from Sydney in 2000, the imperative is to present ourselves truly as

A New Approach (ANA)

we are: diverse, original, imaginative, witty, and deeply immersed in our simultaneously ancient and contemporary cultures.

In the next decade we *can* secure our place as a cultural powerhouse. Doing so is more closely within our grasp than is commonly imagined. But it is up to all of us.

I hope by the end of my address today you recognise your own unique part to play.

The term 'cultural powerhouse' encapsulates a vision of Australia as a forerunner in how we:

- respect and cherish our unique cultural inheritance
- invest in and celebrate our creators, cultural organisations and creative industries
- enable our citizens to participate in and contribute to cultural activity
- and strategically plan and nurture our creative future in a manner that befits our standing as the world's 12th largest economy.

What would this look like in practice? It would be:

- A public who continue to show up in large numbers, take part in and relish arts and cultural events.
- Governments at all levels that collaborate effectively and recognise arts and culture as an investment, not a cost.
- A cultural and creative industry more than ready to earn and own its place both here and globally.
- A business community that's backing and supporting our creative talent and investing in culture and creativity.
- A philanthropic community that is energised to play a key role.
- And a broad vigorous and competitive media ready to be part of asserting that Australia is this place.

Today I will talk about each of these in turn.

Our pathway to becoming a cultural powerhouse began with First Nations cultural and creative practices observed over millennia. These practices are

A New Approach (ANA)

globally unique, have endured despite profound disruption over the last two and a half centuries, have diversified spectacularly through new art forms, new media and cutting-edge production techniques.

Being home to these enduring cultures, as well as the cultures of people from every country on earth, is one of our key advantages. The entwinement of all these strands is our strength. It is what differentiates us. In how we live and in what we experience we can move seamlessly from appreciating the performances of our children in school halls, listening to a favourite radio program, being immersed in a digital game or digitally traversing ancient rock art, attending a country music festival or a radically reinterpreted 19th century opera to reading one of our authors in our own armchair. This entwinement is all ours, and it is of us. And it is what underpins a greater cultural confidence that we can all share.

The good news is that, within our daily lives, each of us will be able to think of many examples. One of my current favourites is *Bluey*. Right now, this animated sensation is presenting our own stories, myths, fables and insights to audiences young and old on television and device screens right across the country and around the world - from suburban Washington to suburban Beijing.

Bluey doesn't announce itself as Australian but Australian is the lingua Franca of the series. With graphics and characters developed here, it is us, telling our stories, in our accents, sharing our values, from our place, showing what life here is like to a connected global audience. If you only have seven minutes, watch the cricket episode. Throughout the series, we are reminded that we don't need to wear a slouch hat to turn up as Australians.

By the most democratic of measures, that of public participation, Australia *is* already a cultural powerhouse.

In fact, Australians are outstanding attendees at cultural events and venues. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 82 percent of Australians reported attending cultural events and venues, pre COVID. To put that 82

A New Approach (ANA)

percent in context, in the European Union it was 64 percent. Embedded in these statistics is the joy, the belonging and what has been described as the 'collective effervescence' of being part of an enraptured audience.

The ABS also found one third of adults do at least one creative activity such as playing a guitar, painting and drawing, performing in a show, participating in a community choir, doing a craft activity or writing a story. We are not just passive audience members waiting for someone else's creativity to wash over us. We are in it immersively and habitually.

In short, we are global stars when it comes to turning up, getting involved, being fans and giving creativity a go. It takes different forms, and it is experienced in different ways. And yes, it's radio and magazines, war memorials and national parks, as well as architecture, video games and fashion. For most of us, there's a powerful beat of creativity that sits in our everyday. Deep daily cultural connection.

Donald Horne's famous dictum in 'The Lucky Country' that 'sport to many Australians is life and the rest a shadow' may have been true 70 years ago, but in Australia today, the deep pervasiveness of arts and cultural engagement and participation has irreversibly illuminated that shadow as it relates to arts and culture.

Over decades, our sporting infrastructure has become our cultural infrastructure, with millions of Australians and visitors attending our major facilities around the nation for concerts and events. Just two artists, global superstars Ed Sheeran and Taylor Swift, will within twelve months attract nearly 600,000 fans to just one venue, the MCG, for five concerts in all. That's the equivalent of six AFL grand finals.

Yes, they are not our own stars. But a cultural powerhouse recognises talent from everywhere. And around the country we turn up in droves for the big events and for the small ones too, for Australian and international performers.

A New Approach (ANA)

So why are so many Australians so keen on culture? To answer that question, A New Approach (ANA) asked them in a nationwide study exploring attitudes towards arts, culture and creativity. In rooms and Zooms around the country we brought together people from low to middle income households, living in outer suburban and regional areas, in every state and territory.

Everyone we brought together was politically unaligned - they had swung their vote more than once at both federal and state or territory level. We spoke with three generations aged between 18 and 75 and the researchers were briefed very explicitly: don't just tell us the good news, we want to know what people really think.

And they said arts, culture and creativity:

- are essential to being human;
- are broad, inclusive and for everyone;
- foster imagination, expression and innovation; and
- are the building blocks of healthy communities and thriving places.

Australians say a world without arts and culture would be 'colourless', depressing', 'uninspiring' and 'like a totalitarian state'. As one person in the study said, without arts and culture: *You may as well live on Mars.*

And Australians expect that participation should be possible for all and think that governments have a key role to play in this.

My message for the public is simple: Good work, keep doing what you're doing. Now that we are out of the worst of the COVID pandemic, let's get back to our five-star engagement levels.

And next time you see your local Member of Parliament tell them how much you like your local festivals, or pub performances, or visiting galleries, or buying Australian designs or your children being able to do dance classes or watching Australian drama on television. There is political potency in arts and culture; don't be shy in making this plain.

A New Approach (ANA)

Over time, we have had successive governments responsible for stewarding our nation's cultural institutions and places. They have all been part of the journey to develop a policy, regulatory and legislative environment — as well as the training pathways, investment mechanisms and infrastructures — that are necessary for arts, culture and creativity to contribute fully to the lives of all Australians.

That commitment of time, and the legacy that it has created across the nation, *should* speak of a place where arts and culture are deeply embedded in policy; are considered to be electorally significant; and are enthusiastically encouraged by culturally confident leaders keen to ensure that, *on their watch*, their actions build on what has gone before them. But we are not yet that place. Both small steps and huge strides are needed for us to be that place.

There is progress. Pleasingly, the Australian Government's new 'Measuring What Matters' framework lists 'Creative and Cultural Engagement' as a key indicator and I wholeheartedly applaud The Treasury's recognition of this as an essential part of wellbeing in this nation.

The National Cultural Policy, launched at the start of this year, also signals new momentum around the country, alongside the major new cultural and creative industry policies in development in states and territories and local governments.

However, we need a sustained vision, beyond any single government. This vision must be confident, committed, and coordinated to take us to where we can and should be. We need purposeful cross-government investment. And we need bold, integrated and future-focused policy settings that recognise the role arts, culture and creativity play in the lives of Australians and our economy.

There are four things we can do now to help make that happen.

A New Approach (ANA)

As my first call-to-action, I urge the members of National Cabinet - our Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers - to commit to closer collaboration on their actions to champion Australian creativity and culture.

A concrete way of doing this would be to elevate the existing meeting of Cultural Ministers to a formalised Ministerial Council, reporting annually to National Cabinet. National Cabinet is the critical authorising environment for the cross-government work that is needed for Australia to thrive in the twenty-first century. This elevation would be a transformative step to give higher priority to the nation's cultural needs.

Crucially, this new Ministerial Council should be tasked with developing an intergovernmental plan for long-term collaboration. This plan should be a formally negotiated mechanism between governments, with a multi-decadal remit across access, workforce and infrastructure outcomes. Importantly, this should be explicitly non-partisan, and local government must have a seat at the table.

International and Australian research confirms that arts and culture have direct, positive impacts on cohesion, health, sustainability, security and prosperity. Providing access to arts and culture for all Australians, wherever they are and wherever they live, is not simply a matter for the arts portfolio. This is a critical whole-of-government responsibility.

My second call to action is for the creation of a single well-funded institution that leads Australia's international cultural relations. Of the top 15 economies in the world, Australia is the *only* nation to not have an organisation of this nature.

Australia should explore what model works for us, ideally through a study commissioned by the Ministerial Council. Such an institution might bear some similarities to the Japan Foundation, The Korea Foundation, Germany's Goethe Institute or the Alliance Francaise. In my view, our institution must be nimble and must be responsive. We can't rely on a multi-agency approach to this critical function. Others have advocated for an institution of this type to be

A New Approach (ANA)

added to our cultural architecture to give demonstrable representation to the world of Australia's cultural maturity, and I am pleased to join the chorus.

We have a responsibility to tell our part of the human story through the power of arts, culture and creative practice. As demonstrated by our sister nations and their global arts councils, institutes and alliances, this is essential for any mature economy.

My third call-to-action is to use more effectively the cultural assets that our nation possesses. In the last decade, cultural diplomacy has been rebranded as soft power. In fact, there is nothing soft about it. It is very serious business with serious intent, and we underestimate its forcefulness. It is a power to be exercised both domestically and internationally.

By example, the collections held here in the National Gallery of Australia established progressively over time tell a powerful story of what we have valued in the past and value for present and future generations. We have vast collections of work from Australia, from Europe, Asia and America. That much is well known. But how can we animate it further to our strategic advantage?

Who knows that we also hold one of the world's richest collections of textiles from Indonesia, many of which are from Banda Aceh. This is significant because so many collections housed in Banda Aceh were destroyed by the tsunami there.

And yet, instead of proudly starting a country delegation visit at a cultural institution to view these types of collections and share what we value, this *may* get programmed as an option on the visit while the business gets done elsewhere.

Other countries, often with less directly relevant collections, are more strategic about how they use cultural engagement to win friends and influence people. A cultural powerhouse knows itself deeply and it knows what it has and how to effectively press its advantage.

A New Approach (ANA)

My fourth call-to-action is to recognise the role that Australia's cultural and creative industries can play in addressing the nation's most complex and pressing economic matters: sluggish productivity, labour shortages, changing skills needs, sticky high inflation and the need for economic reform.

We recognise cultural and creative industries as drivers of ideas, adaptation and connection but they also create economic opportunities for our nation and employ more than 700,000 people. The recent federal budget's focus on modernising our industrial base identified the creative industries as one of three strategic industries.

And cultural engagement by our broader population is recognised as developing the creativity, communication and collaboration skills needed across our twenty-first century workforce. We can do this and reap the benefits through being smart and strategic about the sum the nation invests and without increasing cost of living pressures or the likelihood of other financial imbalances.

This is Australian industry now. And the opportunity exists to harness these benefits to build Australia's future. Let's not treat them as a 'nice to have' but instead take a policy and investment approach that properly reflects the cultural, social and economic benefits they bring to people's lives.'

Now I turn specifically to the cultural and creative sector.

Given that Australia is a source of globally loved creators, producers, technical experts and presenters it is odd that many in the industry don't recognise and celebrate it themselves. Australian talent extends way beyond the objects that we create and the performances we produce. We regularly export to the world some of the most highly regarded cultural leaders of our time.

We rightly get excited when an Australian turns up as the head coach of an English Premier League team.

A New Approach (ANA)

We should also be proud if not ecstatic when our cultural leaders are performing and creating and leading cultural organisations and projects across a wide arc of geography and influence *as they are* in art galleries, film studios, festivals and opera houses across the world, along with scooping literature prizes, dominating game design, fabricating large scale art works, writing musical scores and starring in comedy festivals. This has been going on for decades.

Today I urge all those working in Australian arts, cultural and creative industries to see themselves as others already do - you are leaders and your experiences, skills and contributions are respected, valued and highly sought after. Whilst I know and understand that it may not always feel like that, Australia already enjoys a cachet in the world that can be grown and developed.

What of the business community?

Arts, cultural and creative industries are proven drivers of innovation, yet business seems to be slow at recognising and engaging home-grown talent. Recruiting next generation skills across creative disciplines can be transformative to internal thinking, processes and culture. Buying off the shelf overseas solutions designed for other places doesn't nurture and develop our greatest resource - our smart people.

A recent McKinsey study found that companies embracing creativity outperform their peers with above average organic revenue growth, total return to shareholders and net enterprise value. And they're more innovative, scoring sixteen percent higher than the average consumer-facing company. My invitation to business is to more fully embrace the creative talent that is on your doorstep. Know that they are here and create strategies to bring them in to your businesses.

I would also like to share a perspective with corporate Australia about cultural sponsorships which I distinguish from philanthropy. In general terms, philanthropy is the gift, and sponsorship is the deal. There can be some

A New Approach (ANA)

overlap and both can be strategic. But there are different ideas that are brought to each. And it is sponsorships that I address here.

Corporate Australia, you should think of your cultural sponsorships as amongst your most prized assets. They enhance your brand, your reputation, and your value as a business. If you are in any doubt, speak to other corporations who have serially and consistently maintained or expanded their support for cultural organisations over time. They get it.

And, as an aside, how is it even possible that global businesses operating in Australia with billions of dollars of contracts don't see either the obligation or the economic and strategic advantage to them in investing in this country's arts and culture? How do those Australians signing those contracts not ask the question and demand it? For Australia to become a cultural powerhouse, we need all parties to subscribe to that vision.

I turn now to the very particular role that philanthropy might perform in supporting Australia to become a cultural powerhouse, with a narrower focus on the creative arts and those cultural organisations serving the public good. I recognise the good fortune that Australia has in the many philanthropic acts, over time and more recently, that have supported our nation's cultural development.

And it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the philanthropic supporters of ANA and the extraordinarily long and deep connections that they have with arts and culture.

The spirit of philanthropy is private and individual and no two philanthropic organisations are the same.

They have different priorities, purposes and objectives, different governance structures, competing funding programs, and different financial capacities and timeframes.

A New Approach (ANA)

Whilst the philanthropic sector itself is subject to legislation, the philanthropic acts themselves cannot be directed by governments, though government and philanthropy can work collaboratively, and often they leverage each other's investment recognising some areas of common purpose.

Building Australia's arts and cultural sectors forms a logical alignment between government and philanthropy, and the alignment is one that can be supported by both generous individuals and philanthropic institutions. Indeed, this alignment is one that has existed all along with generations of support for public institutions such as galleries, museums, libraries and performing arts centres.

However, participants in the philanthropic sector are often stuck on whether they should support arts and culture, and if yes, how?

If your terms of reference permit it, my firm advice to you is yes, you should, and you should do so with trust and confidence in the expertise, creativity and grit of cultural organisations and individual creators.

And you should do so to support Australia's quest to become a cultural powerhouse. Your other program areas will be enhanced by you having a foot in this practice and the crossover of funding will benefit your overall philanthropic impact.

In a world where outcomes and impacts get measured and evaluated to within an inch of their lives, the remark that I hear so often, particularly in the cultural sector, is 'you won't know this but...' and a personal story gets shared with me about a philanthropic grant that was made at a critical juncture in that person's life or in the life of an organisation.

They say: 'You took a chance on me', 'I was trusted', 'if I hadn't been backed at that moment', 'had it not been for that grant...'. These dangerously unscientific anecdotes of utterly transformative grant making speak to what philanthropy is and what it does.

A New Approach (ANA)

And it is the sub-set of philanthropy, cultural philanthropy, that draws the philanthropic sector closer to the creative heart of our nation. The DNA embedded in these types of grants and the relationships that are formed is a DNA that improves all grant making.

Philanthropy is the best social venture capital that there is. By applying it to creators, the creative arts and cultural organisations, it is enabling Australia's culture to flourish with known multiplier benefits across the whole community.

My encouragement is to take the chance and keep doing it. And then look forward to the anecdotes and the impact. Harness the freedom of philanthropy to work for long-term public benefit.

Finally, to the media, our hosts today. My counsel is to recognise the singular contribution that mainstream media can play by meaningfully giving visibility to Australia's arts and culture. Your listeners and readers are already deeply engaged.

The opportunity is to recognise the vibrant and valued role that everyday Australians place on their own cultural participation. Celebrate the nation's creative achievements and the many individual ones. You have an important part to play in asserting Australia's cultural confidence.

How will we know when we have become a cultural powerhouse?

We will be a cultural powerhouse when we have:

- an engaged public - tick.
- governments at all levels that collaborate effectively and recognise arts and culture as an investment, not a cost - work to be done.
- a cultural and creative industry more than ready to own our place in global arts and culture - on the way.
- a business community that is backing, supporting and investing in culture and creativity - work to be done.
- a philanthropic community that recognises it has a key role to play - work to be done.

A New Approach (ANA)

- a broad media ready to be part of asserting this place - work to be done.
- an ability to independently benchmark, track and evaluate our efforts - ANA is tackling this.

What do you want your Australia to look like in 2035?

It is my view that Australia can be a place where arts, culture and creativity thrive in its fullest expression.

We can have a pro-culture legislative, regulatory and leadership environment fostering a cultural sector that is able to invest in its own success.

In ANA's estimation, we can be home to a \$270 billion industry that employs almost 1 million people.

We can celebrate arts, culture and creativity as part of what it means to be Australian both here and abroad.

There is no other country like ours on earth and yet we are connected to every other country on earth.

There are bigger conversations that we can have in this era and our cultural engagement can deliver us into them. We have a point of difference. Some of those differences are expressed magnificently in the new Australian Embassy in Washington.

Like *Bluey*, we can be ourselves but don't need to parade our Australianness. We can exercise our cultural confidence and our creative strength as a mature nation of the twenty-first century.