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Senate Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy

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The Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Discussion Paper and Terms of Reference for the Senate Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy.

Before making specific comments, we will outline who we are and what we do, and emphasise some core concepts and findings about trust and values.

Who we are

AMaGA is the national membership association and peak advocacy body representing museums and galleries. We encompass a wide and diverse range of national, state, regional and community museums, art galleries, historic sites, botanic and zoological gardens, research centres, Indigenous cultural centres, and Keeping Places across Australia. Our 1400 members represent additional thousands of individual professionals through the large institutions.

All of our members are linked by a shared dedication to culture and the communities they serve. They understand that Australian cultural life is a dynamic ecosystem that generates creativity and innovation and contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the country.

AMaGA is an advocacy, research, service and professional development organisation. We seek to enhance the value of Australia's collections, public programs and stories by sharing knowledge, developing skills, inspiring innovation and providing leadership and the authoritative voice in protecting and promoting our arts, science and cultural heritage.

We advocate for museums and galleries, identify and undertake strategic research, inform policy, set ethical standards and run a broad range of training programs. More information on the organisation and our members can be found at <https://www.amaga.org.au/annual-reports-0>

We build on a history of museum professional association activity that extends back to the 1930s, have branches in every state and territory, and support professional national networks of expertise. This submission draws both on the lived experience of our galleries and museums, and state, national and international research, expertise and standards.

The cultural sector

The cultural sector is the parallel source of knowledge to the formal education system and museums and galleries, as core parts of this sector, are fundamental sources of information, learning and engagement for people of all ages and abilities. These institutions encourage curiosity, creativity and critical thinking, offer rich aesthetic and emotional experiences through art, science, history and story-telling, and enable people to access objects and collections in ways that enrich lives and society. Furthermore, they help foster the creative industries which are one of the engine houses of the economy. (Henley, 2016)

Vital Statistics

- **98%** of Australians engage with the arts. (*Australia Council National Participation Survey Report 2017*)
- In 2017/18 **over 10 million** people visited the national collecting institutions (on + off site)
- **33%** of people with a disability had visited a museum or gallery in 2014 (*ABS General Social Survey, 2014*)
- **Over 50,000** Australians volunteer in museums and galleries

Definition of museum

We define “museum” as an organisation with the following characteristics:
A museum helps people understand the world by using objects and ideas to interpret the past and present and explore the future. A museum preserves and researches collections, and makes objects and information accessible in actual and virtual environments. Museums are established in the public interest as permanent, not-for-profit organisations that contribute long term value to communities. (AMaGA's Constitution)

Globally, museums are expanding on this foundation and recalibrating their roles and purposes. The International Council of Museums is developing a new definition of museums which recognises museums as “democratising institutions”, which aim to be inclusive, participatory and to work in active partnership with and for diverse communities.

Trust

Museums are hugely trusted institutions in civil society. Research by the American Alliance of Museums finds that:

Museums are considered the most trustworthy source of information in America, rated higher than local papers, non-profits researchers, the U.S. government, or academic researchers.

In fact in the US:

Museums are considered a more reliable source of historical information than books, teachers or even personal accounts by relatives. (AAM, 2019)

Not only are museums viewed as highly credible sources of information, they are also trusted entities overall. (Dilenschneider, 2017)

In Australia, research carried out by independent market research company IPSOS for the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, Canberra, reveals that museums are very high on the list of institutions that are trusted by Australians.

Operating as spaces of civic trust, museums “promote historically informed discussion of national ideas, and strive for a fundamentally inclusive understanding of the many facets of the Australian story.” As such, “they largely avoid the accusations of populism and self-interest that have come to plague contemporary political fora.” (Breyard, 2019)

The value of history

History shapes our identities, engages us as citizens, creates inclusive communities, is part of our economic well-being, teaches us to think critically and creatively, inspires leaders and is the foundation of our future generations.

We strongly endorse this statement by Australia's History Councils on the value of history in contemporary life. For further elaboration see <https://historycouncilnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Value-of-History-flyer-DRAFT.pdf>

Specific Terms of Reference (ToRs): (a) and (c)

Please refer [here](#) to our relevant previous submission to the Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions by the Parliament of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on the national capital and external territories, as it contains detailed information, examples, references and recommendations pertinent to this Inquiry.

In addition to the information in AMaGA's submission referred to above, we would make the following points about the roles and capabilities of museums and galleries in the areas of changing notions of nationhood and citizenship [ToR (a)], and social cohesion and cultural identity [ToR (c)].

Nationhood and National Identity

History has always been a contested terrain, and museums have explicitly and implicitly been involved in narratives of nation-building and the processes of identity formation – whether at national, regional, local or individual levels.

In Australia, museums have been engaged strongly in shaping national identity through three successive frameworks:

- history shaped by explorers, pioneers, settlers, rural farmers, itinerant workers, miners, soldiers – and predominantly white people (*forming the dominant narrative*)
- history shaped by immigrants, multicultural communities, urbanism, the contributions of women, environmental awareness, and study of Indigenous prehistory (*expanding the status quo*)
- history shaped by multifaceted processes, multiple stories and perspectives, asking new questions, and increasingly recognising the continuity of Indigenous cultures (*challenging and shifting the status quo*)

Notwithstanding these changes in focus, historians of Australia consider that the role of museums remains central to our development as a social community: "Museums continue to be instrumental in the evolution of Australian national identities". (Scorrano, 2012).

Some of the most exciting current trends in museum thinking and practice focus on seeking inclusion and challenging assumptions.

Many museums around the world, therefore, are rethinking national histories through new concepts and different perceptions. Museums in Australia are responding in both the types of stories they are researching and presenting, and the ways in which they do this. National identity is less consensual, more fractured; is less spoken of as a central concept; and is increasingly interwoven with Indigenous histories and continuing cultures.

A significant example is the development and adoption of AMaGA's 10-year Indigenous Roadmap, and a revised policy for the sector. These come at a time of national questioning about our past and our institutionalised racism, and renewed support for the call for truth-telling and political change in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, made in 2017.

After several years of consultation and research *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries* was launched in May 2019. It is being adopted and implemented across the country, and promoted world-wide.

The Roadmap is about helping to build more respectful and trusting relationships between museums and galleries, and Indigenous peoples. It was developed for the sector in consultation with the sector. Built on 5 Key Elements for Change, there are numerous action options and critical pathways to success. Implementation of the Roadmap will be crucial for breaking down barriers and improving the engagement of Indigenous individuals and communities with our museums and galleries. The participation and representation of Indigenous Australians in this sector is crucial to securing reconciliation between first and settler Australians and enabling a maturing sense of national identity.

Citizenship

As sites of civic trust *and* national expertise, museums and galleries provide valued and safe spaces to explore Australians' connected experience and aspiration, as individuals and as members of communities and the nation.

The significance of this work is recognised in the Australian Parliament's report *Telling Australia's story - and why it's important: Report on the inquiry into Canberra's national institutions* (2019). It acknowledges that our best institutions are able to nurture civic engagement because they are maintained as places of civic trust. As in other democracies around the world, it has much to do with long-maintained institutional cultures of independence, concern for impact, honest inquiry and equity of opportunity. (Breyndard, 2019)

Recent examples include the partnership between the Museum of Australian Democracy (MOAD) and the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra (UC-IGPA), which has established *Democracy 2025* - a centre for excellence for research, innovation and dialogue, with MOAD developing museum exhibitions drawing on the robust research findings. Another example is an ARC linkage project between Monash University, led by Dr Moore, and the Tasmanian Museum and Gallery looking at the influence of convict history on Australian democracy through analysing and visualising recently digitised convict archives.

Dr Moore's belief is that our convict legacy has much to teach us in this political moment – when almost 2.5 million Australians are employed as casuals, when unions are under attack from politicians and some businesses, when housing is unaffordable for many, and when citizens' rights are being eroded in the name of national security.

"Australians need to understand how we got to the world our parents were in and we're in, to know what they're defending and how to defend it," he says. "There are important lessons about being citizens that I think we can learn from these brave people." (CAMD, 2019)

The sector's relevance as a resource for research and generating new knowledge about citizenship, nationhood and national identity is profound and increasing.

In other aspects of museum and gallery practice, voicing your opinion or sharing your experience – whether as visitor, citizen, or community collaborator – is an accelerating trend. An outstanding international example of this approach is the History of Innovation exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History – where a fascinating history of inventions in the USA explicitly encourages reflection, application of insights to your own life, and sharing of your answers to questions based on the skillsets shown by pioneering innovators. Similarly, the Newseum, also in Washington DC, on a display panel covering Privacy versus Security after 9/11, asks 'What would you give up to feel safer?', and invites personal responses: 'Use a marker to share your thoughts, or call 202/292 6529 to leave your comments by phone.'

Back in Australia, the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House successfully engaged online audiences in 2015 in re-imagining the November 1975 drama of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's Dismissal, through running a Twitter feed on the 40th anniversary of the event as the critical days and decisions were revisited.

"We don't look at our museums as a finished monument, but a changing thing, enacting its civic responsibilities in a variety of ways." (Gurian, 2017)

Social Cohesion and Inclusion

Cultural institutions are central to maintaining social cohesion. They connect Australians with the stories and histories of their community at a local, regional and national level. Museums and galleries around the world are using historical research and enquiry, and commissioning contemporary art, to support a process of active reflection on nationhood, citizenship and cultural identity; and to encourage participation in democracy. (Breynard, 2019)

An increasing body of evidence shows that "museums can bring benefits to individual and community health and wellbeing in their role as public forums for debate and learning, their work with specific audiences through targeted programmes, and by contributing to positive wellbeing and resilience by helping people to make sense of the world and their place within it..." (Dodd and Jones 2014)

Most museums in Australia are small, volunteer-managed community organisations which are embedded in their local communities and provide a range of social and economic benefits, including a sense of belonging to their community, and of contributing to society. These museums are generally woefully under-resourced. One of the most useful and cost-effective actions that governments at all levels could do for enhancing social cohesion and inclusion is to provide professional advice and an adequate level of funding support for these organisations.

In the UK, there is significant support for public investments in social participation and inclusion through the arts. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing carried out an extensive inquiry in 2016/2017. The three key messages from that inquiry were:

- "The arts can help keep us well, aid our recovery and support longer lives better lived.
- The arts can help meet major challenges facing health and social care: ageing, long term conditions, loneliness and mental health.
- The arts can help save money in the health service and social care." (APPG Inquiry 2017)

There is growing interest, as well, on the efficacy of the arts on the prescription/social prescribing model. Evaluation of a pilot program in the UK in 2015/16 found that "Benefits of attending [the workshops] included improved reported mental health and wellbeing; increased physical activity, and an increase in social activity. A social return on investment conducted as part of the evaluation found that for every £1 invested in the programme, £11.55 was returned in social value." (Whelan 2016)

Similarly, the work of GLAM Peak (the network of peak bodies in the galleries, libraries, archives, historical societies and museums sectors) over the last three years has revealed the power of digital discoverability and access to collections for increasing participation and social connection by people with a range of capabilities. Strategies and support for the digitisation of collections in regional and community galleries and museums would be an invaluable contribution to Australians' social engagement as well as historical understanding.

Finally, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals draw on a number of activities and targets that are central to museums and their roles as outlined in this submission.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Museums and galleries nurture civic engagement because they are maintained as places of civic trust. They are increasingly becoming forums for community engagement on important issues related to their missions. Furthermore, people believe that museums, drawing on their knowledge and expertise, should recommend action and sets of behaviours. (Dilenschneider, 2017)

Museums and galleries are therefore well placed to contribute to the discussion around nationhood, national identity and democracy. Along with other cultural organisations such as libraries they are critical providers of information, engagement and exploration.

AMaGA recommends that:

1. The significant work of museums and galleries in this arena is acknowledged in the Committee's report.
2. Increased and targeted resourcing for this work would expand their impact and help strengthen a sense of a shared civic community, and public trust in and commitment to liberal democracy.
3. A national policy framework for strengthening democracy, that encompasses cross-governmental strategies and programs, is co-developed with the research community, cultural organisations and non-government sector, and resourced over the longer-term.

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