

Is cultural diversity to be archived?



Jennefer Nicholson

Executive director
jennefer.nicholson@alia.org.au

Australia's strategic alliances with the United States of America and their consequences have been the standout story in January in what is traditionally a slow news period with many Australians presumably preoccupied with Christmas and New Year celebrations, holidays, the beach, cricket and tennis. It even brought the Prime Minister back from his holiday for a day.

One alliance that is currently at the forefront is the bilateral US Australia Free Trade Agreement. The federal government has stepped up its public affairs activity on the proposed Agreement leading into the negotiations due to start in February 2003. Submissions from interested parties were called for by 15 January 2003.

Cultural diversity is a significant component of any multi- or bilateral agreement that Australia may negotiate or enter into. The Association has previously raised its concern with the government that trade agreements, such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), constrain government policy and regulatory options in favour of the free market. Imperatives such as these may override cultural objectives unless there is a commitment by the government to a cultural exemption in all trade agreements. Publicly funded libraries serve a public policy agenda that corrects the failure of free markets to meet broader community goals such as universal access to information and literacy. These should not be exposed to the opening up of the potential threat of further competition for public funds through trade agreements. (<http://www.alia.org.au/submissions/trade.html>)

A statement by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Office of Trade Negotiations (22 August 2002) states that 'The Government has made it clear that in responding to any GATS requests it receives, it will ensure that its ability to regulate services is maintained and that cultural and other policy objectives are taken into account.'

The elevation of activity on the US Australia bilateral agreement has coalesced professional organisations in the cultural sector into the Australian Coalition for Cultural Diversity (ACCD) to provide a single voice to Government specifically on trade issues. ALIA is a member. The ACCD submission draws on the Canadian experiences under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Australia Singapore Free Trade Agreement.

For the purposes of the submission the ACCD adopts the definition of 'culture' in the Australia-Singapore FTA 'includes the creative arts(1), cultural heritage(2) and other cultural industries, including audio-visual services, entertainment services and libraries,

archives, museums and other cultural services; broadcasting and audio-visual services, including measures relating to planning, licensing and spectrum management, and including:

- services offered in Australia
 - international service originating from Australia
- (1) Creative arts include: the performing arts — including theatre, dance and music — visual arts and craft, literature, film, television, video, radio, creative on-line content, indigenous traditional practice and contemporary cultural expression, and digital interactive media and hybrid arts work which uses new technologies to transcend artform divisions.
 - (2) Cultural heritage includes: ethnological, archaeological, historical, literary, artistic, scientific or technological moveable built heritage, including the collections which are documented, preserved and exhibited by museums, galleries, libraries, archives and other heritage collecting institutions.

'Cultural diversity' is defined as 'Cultural diversity, which is manifest through "diversity of cultural expression" has many aspects. For purposes of this submission, the ACCD refers especially to cultural diversity *between* nations, a diversity which results from each nation having the right to sustain and develop its own culture without constraint from international trade agreements.'

In its press release on its submission the ACCD calls on the Australian Government to support Australian culture in its upcoming trade negotiations with the United States of America. It urges the federal government to insist on a broad exemption for culture in the negotiations, to allow Australian governments to continue supporting and fostering Australian cultural expression. The ACCD believes that pressure will be applied by the US in the forthcoming negotiations to restrict the Australian government's freedom to act in support of cultural policy objectives. The US Trade Representative has been openly critical of measures such as the Australian content rules for television as barriers to free trade. The ACCD believes, however, that it is equally important to consider the impact of free trade commitments on the whole range of Australian cultural expression, and the extent to which such commitments could limit the government's capacity to create initiatives to support these areas. It is essential that we have a distinctive voice with which to culturally express ourselves in the future. The ACCD notes that Australian government support for culture is open, measured and does not pose any real threat to the ability of the USA to sell its cultural products and services in Australia.

Media commentary on Australia's engagement in free trade agreements focuses on the economic benefits to Australia and access to markets through such agreements. ALIA and the ACCD will continue advocating on behalf of the cultural sector to ensure that perceived economic benefits are not gained at the cost of Australia's cultural diversity. ■

Feedback to your Board of Directors

Do you have an idea, compliment or concern about *your* Association? Contact any director below on personal issues and ideas will be reviewed at each meeting of the Board.

E-mail to feedback@alia.org.au will be automatically forwarded to all Board members.

Joyce Kirk [*president*] phone 02 9514 1926, fax 02 9514 2711
joyce.kirk@alia.org.au

Christine Mackenzie [*vice-president*] phone 07 3403 4255, fax 07 3403 9969,
christine.mackenzie@alia.org.au

Angela Bridgland, phone 03 8344 5368, fax 03 9347 7243,
angela.bridgland@alia.org.au

Kevin Dudeney, phone 02 9804 5448, fax 02 9804 5460,
kevin.dudeney@alia.org.au

Moyra McAllister, phone 03 9679 3423, fax 03 9679 3111,
moyra.mcallister@alia.org.au

Deanne Barrett, phone 08 9268 7138, fax 08 9221 3261,
deanne.barrett@alia.org.au

Vicki McDonald, phone 07 3842 9405, fax 07 3840 7860,
vicki.mcdonald@alia.org.au