



15 September 2008

Mr Paul Salmond
Assistant Secretary
Literature and Indigenous Culture
Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts
GPO Box 787
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Salmond

Thank you for your letter of 9 Sep 2008 inviting ICOM Australia to quickly respond to your series of questions regarding the possible ratification by the Australian Government of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (the Convention).

ICOM international and ICOM Australia have a keen interest in the Convention.

1. International Council of Museums (ICOM) background

ICOM Australia is a part of the global network of museum and heritage professionals committed to the world's natural and cultural heritage. As a branch of the International Council of Museums it is an advocate for museums. It also represents the international interests of its member museums and museum professionals across Australia and nearby regions.

ICOM Australia is committed to promoting an Australian perspective on the conservation, continuity and communication to society of the world's diverse natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible.

ICOM is a non-governmental, non-profit body created in 1946. ICOM maintains formal relations with UNESCO and has a consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

2. Relationship with Museums Australia

ICOM Australia complements Museums Australia in that both associations provide advocacy on behalf of the Australian museum community. ICOM Australia provides an international perspective while Museums Australia has a national focus. While working closely together both organisations have an independent voice.

3. Implications of ratification of the Convention

The following responses to your questions are intended to offer a general initial overview of the issues from an ICOM Australia perspective.

International Council of Museums Australian Committee Incorporated

ABN 47 613 685 234 www.icom.org.au

PO Box 266 CIVIC SQUARE ACT 2608

a) Does your organisation support ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage? Why?

Broadly speaking ICOM Australia endorses the Convention. In doing so it adopts the position of Resolution 1 of the 21st General Assembly of ICOM held in Seoul on 8 October 2004, known as the 'Seoul declaration of ICOM on the Intangible Cultural Heritage'.

This is based on the rationale that intangible heritage is of great importance in the preservation of cultural diversity. This recognises that creativity, adaptability, and the distinctiveness of peoples, places and communities provide a framework in museological and heritage practices. This framework recognises that voices, traditions, languages, oral history and folk life are part of the heritage of humanity¹.

ICOM's support of the Convention is further underpinned by the recognition that intangible cultural heritage continues to be threatened by forces of standardisation. These forces include globalisation, tourism, migration, the degradation of the environment, industrialisation, rural exodus and armed conflict².

The work of ICOM, its member museums and individuals in advocating and undertaking their museological activities supports measures to safeguard intangible heritage since

*It is a living fabric with which history is constituted, a source of identity, creativity and of cultural diversity.*³

The Convention is an important global mechanism for Australia and other nations to act locally and internationally.

b) Would ratification change the current activities you undertake for the protection of Australia's intangible cultural heritage and the way in which you perform these activities?

Ratification would reinforce ICOM Australia's mission and values. ICOM Australia recognises that the Convention is a step in a process of heritage protection. Ongoing dialogue and interpretation with communities – both indigenous and non-indigenous – must identify, address and resolve any concerns and issues.

c) What resource implications would ratification be likely to have for your work in this area?

In ratifying the Convention some resource implications for Australian governments, museums and cultural institutions might include:

- establishment of an Intangible Heritage Promotion Fund
- support for the conservation of all perishable records, notably electronic and documentary heritage resources
- enabling national and local authorities to adopt and effectively implement appropriate local laws and regulations for the protection of intangible heritage
- monitoring and resisting any attempt to misuse intangible heritage resources and particularly their commercialisation without benefits to the primary custodians

¹ ICOM Shanghai Charter (Oct 2002)

² UNESCO: *safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage*, p. 5, ICOM News No.4, 2003

³ Ibid

- assisting agencies in the development and the implementation of legal instruments and training staff responsible for effective implementation
- training programs for museum professionals stressing the importance of intangible heritage.

d) *What existing activities of your organisation support the protection of Australia's intangible cultural heritage? How would these activities sit within Australia's obligations under the Convention if the Government were to ratify?*

ICOM Australia advocates:

- professional cooperation and exchange
- dissemination of knowledge and raising public awareness of museums
- training of personnel
- advancement of professional standards
- elaboration and promotion of professional ethics
- preservation of heritage
- combating the illicit traffic in cultural property.

Further ICOM and ICOM Australia:

- values human creativity and its contribution to understanding the past, shaping the present, and mapping the future
- believes heritage has a humanistic value
- values global dialogue based on intellectual, cultural and social diversity
- values transparent dialogue including cross-cultural understanding of human rights
- recognises museums' responsibility to society through their engagement with public issues of social change.

Each of these activities and values are integrally involved in the protection of Australia's intangible cultural heritage. Ratification of the Convention by the Australian Government would strongly align with these activities and values of ICOM Australia and the broad museum community.

ICOM Australia would welcome further consultation on any of these matters and is most willing to participate in any discussions the Australian Government may wish to hold on these matters.

Yours sincerely

Roger Garland
National Secretary
ICOM Australia

ph: (02) 6208 5122 fax: (02) 6208 5398 email: r.garland@nma.gov.au