Cherish Harold Holt’s legacy so the arts can flourish

It is 50 years ago today that Harold Holt announced his government’s decision to support Australian cultural activity by establishing a council for the arts and a national gallery.

In taking those steps, he said he wished to encourage those who had contributed to advancing Australia’s “distinctive cultural activities”, enabling them to “rise to new heights”. Time has shown what visionary decisions they were.

It is interesting to reflect on what kind of place Australia was when this cultural intervention took place. We had a population of 12 million, and a weekly wage of $57. Australia had troops in Vietnam and indigenous Australians were given the right to be counted for the first time in the national census after a national referendum. The cultural landscape, still comparatively sparse, was dotted with events such as the opening of Melbourne’s La Mama Theatre. Thomas Keneally’s novel Bring Larks and Heroes won the Miles Franklin Award. Joan Lindsay’s Picnic at Hanging Rock was published. And John (then Johnny) Farnham released Sadie (The Cleaning Lady).

Almost certainly there remained some insecurity around Australia’s cultural identity. This perhaps makes Holt’s decision all the more courageous and ground breaking. In this context, it demonstrated recognition of the value of commonwealth support for the arts, as well as a belief in the potential for this support to help shape a stronger sense of Australian cultural identity.

Today, the Australia Council for the Arts and the National Gallery of Australia are the beneficiaries of bipartisan support.

The NGA collection comprises more than 150,000 works of art, valued at about $6 billion. It is the largest collection held by any art gallery in Australia. It strives to make art accessible, meaningful and vital to diverse audiences locally, nationally and internationally.

Commonwealth support for the arts undoubtedly has encouraged a broad art culture throughout the nation and, at times, has challenged totemic views of cultural inclusion. Last year, financial support from the Australia Council led to the creation of more than 6500 new Australian works, reaching audiences of at least 3.8 million.

Being the peak body for the arts, it is never far from a debate, and we are all better for it. The more we discuss our ambitions for arts and culture in this nation, the richer we are as a society. Being arms-length from government with processes that are contestable, transparent and peer-reviewed, the Australia Council has always supported excellence, cultural democracy and audience engagement.
Recent research confirms that the vast majority of Australians have a strong belief in the value of the arts, even if a little too often it is our guilty secret. It also highlights our continuing and increasing appreciation for, and experience of, the arts and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Despite the fulfilment of much of Holt’s ambition, a broader expression of belief is required to ensure that Australian artists and creative endeavours are a source of national pride, a reflection of our diversity and a measure of our nation’s achievements. The evidence is overwhelming that the arts contribute substantially to better educational attainment, improved mental and physical health, social inclusion and happiness.

The arts are not just entertainment and what you might do after 5pm. They are integral to life. Holt’s legacy ought to be a core belief in, and broad public demand for, the sustained support of cultural activity from all three tiers of government, as well as from substantial private investment.

Noel Pearson’s powerful narrative that confidently defines our unique Australian identity is based on his description of three epic journeys here: the first out of Africa 70,000 years ago, the second of 1770 and those of the Enlightenment, and the third being all those journeys escaping persecution, war zones or seeking economic betterment. The crossover of these stories creates a potent and continuing source of cultural expression and inspiration.

There is much work to be done to realise the full potential of our great good fortune. Holt’s two fine institutions are perfectly placed to drive, reflect, challenge and excite all of us as our artists intertwine these strands of memories, tales, experiences and beliefs.

Rupert Myer AO has been chairman of the Australia Council for the Arts since 2012 and was chairman of the National Gallery of Australia from 2005 to 2012.

This piece was first published in The Australian on November 1, 2017