

National Cultural Policy Submission

Kris Kneen

To the Arts Minister Tony Burke and team.

The arts play a unique role in life in Australia and around the world. The arts bring relief from the general bleakness of our daily life, they provide a sense of wonder when not everyone has religion to bring that to their lives. The arts provide perspective on current events, allowing us to reflect on ethics, morals and the direction of our lives as humans on this planet. The arts are also prescient, predicting futures and exploring them, giving us time to plan ahead for what might and in fact probably will come.

I am a writer. I will have had ten major works published by the end of 2023. I write in the areas of fiction, memoir, non-fiction and poetry. Much of my work over the past few years has been possible due to a series of grants I have received. These grants have helped me to find time to write when I would otherwise be working in retail, earning a minimal wage just to support my real work, writing books. A very small amount of money is needed to support that work because I find real value in doing the work itself. I know my work has influenced other writers and readers. I know my books have changed the way some readers see the world. Some of my work has anticipated the ravages of the climate crisis, the pandemic and some major leaps forward in technology. Together, my readers and I have wrestled with the implication of what we are marching towards together.

It is through the arts that we can take a moment to look forward, to ask ourselves what it is to be human and to come to a collective understanding about what is most important in the world.

We need to support this valuable contribution to our society. We need to treat it as a field of endeavour that enhances us culturally. We need to support home-grown Australian voices and value what we have in Australia as separate to the imported art created in the USA, UK and Europe.

I am struck by how incredibly mean-spirited it is that literary prizes, which are so rare to get and which feel similar to a writer to winning a lottery, are taxed. Sometimes that little boost to the ego and income is the only thing keeping a writer going, struggling in a very harsh and competitive environment with few perks and accolades. Abolishing the taxation of literary awards (and properly taxing rich companies instead) would be a small gesture that we value the often-thankless work of creating art.

Grants for writing have kept me going for the last few years and I have used every second of this time to pursue my art. If my work has influenced others and contributed in any way to the cultural life of this country then I have those few grants to thank. I have managed to create a life where I can live on minimum income as long as I have time to do my work. I know many other writers who do the same. A small amount of financial support similar to a pension or Newstart allowance would be enough for many artists to live on. The

contribution of artists to the community for such a small amount of money would be invaluable. Look at all the work that was created during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. A minimum wage for some artists meant that they could focus on creating work. Books, albums, screenplays, visual arts, all of these works created during this time helped us to live through the most stressful years of some people's lives. The money given to companies like Harvey Norman changed nothing. The money given as a wage to artists changed so much.

There are many links in the chain that help get the work of writers into the hands of readers and every step is vital for the creation of books but I am here to say that in the publishing industry, writers are often the least valued and lowest paid. People working in other areas of the industry get a full-time wage. Writers almost never do. We must not lose sight of the people who create that art. Without them we are just a machine, not a culture. Writers and artists make meaning of life, they make life worth living. We should think of the arts as we used to think of religion, as something outside of industry, not a cog in an economic wheel, but something that gives meaning to people's lives. Something that helps us define ourselves. Something that brings us pure joy and also an understanding of ourselves as a culture. As a part of this, First Nations' artists should be supported as a primary imperative. First Nations voices are the foundation for the rest of the art that is created in this country and the interplay between First Nations and non-indigenous arts is a vital one.

Please consider more support for the artists who make everyone's lives richer and provide more meaning in a world that seems to value nothing but money.

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