

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION

Dr Fiona Kelly McGregor August 2022

I am a multidisciplinary artist and writer, about to publish my 8th book, the historical crime novel *Iris*, completed during a recent Australia Council residency in Rome. The BR Whiting Studio was benefacted to the Literature Board in 1990 by Lorrie Whiting after the death of her husband, Melbourne-born poet Bertie Whiting. It was the best writer's residency I've ever had; the field is so competitive I had to apply three times before succeeding. I write better when I'm away; distance as well as living in a foreign language sharpens my focus yet Australia's geographical isolation makes travel expensive. *Iris* was a long, difficult novel to write and I'm certain I wouldn't have completed it as quickly nor as well without this fabulous opportunity.

The Whiting Studio was in a state of disrepair and funds for its upkeep were always difficult for the Australia Council to acquire. Basics such as electrical wiring, plumbing, the paving on the wonderful outdoor terrace, should be taken for granted in a place auspiced by the richest country in the world. The management in terms of both the Italians in situ, and the Australia Council staff, is faultless. Delays in necessary works had been stressful for them and added to their workload. Romans are agog at the Whiting Studio. In the decades since the Whitings bought it, the city has naturally grown and so too the place's value. A penthouse close to the centre of one of the most fascinating cities in Europe should be cherished by the government; for us writers it's Gold and I'm still pinching myself I got it.

In the archive of reports left by the previous writers were constant remarks at the Australian ambassador's disregard; there were no cultural activities organised when I was there either (Omicron can account for only 3 months of hiatus). I'm noting this because I think it indicates a disregard for the arts in Australia that predates the current funding crisis.

I didn't want to return to Sydney largely due to the lack of respect given to artists here. We tend to be valued only when we win prizes – preferably foreign ones. The local writer

working on local material is overlooked. What we need more than anything is to be valued for our quotidian worth. As artisans. As cultural custodians. As WORKERS. If we had a government that valued us as much as miners, this might change.

The 44% reduction of funding to the literary sector is a crisis; I fervently back all the submissions I have read but I want to go further and stress as crucial to a National Cultural Policy the need for a Universal Basic Income as well as a fair tax system. I also received a New Work Fellowship for *Iris* in 2016. It was \$50,000 for two years but the Australia Council could only pay it to me in one sum, so I lost \$8000 of it in tax the following year; after that, I was back to that doleful median wage of \$12,900. That is the very definition of giving with one hand and taking with the other. It's inefficient economically, let alone artistically.

Tax breaks for writers in Ireland have been implemented for years and shown to have great success. For such a tiny country it sure punches above its weight in terms of literature. The value the Irish place on their storytellers is part and parcel with this government policy. UBIs are now being trialled in Scandinavian countries, with encouraging results. We don't live on stationary alone. We buy groceries, we pay bills, we send our kids to soccer clubs, we'd buy theatre tickets if we could afford them: give us a UBI and it will flow back into the economy.

I can ride out the financial vicissitudes of being a writer as I live frugally, currently have no dependents and am one of the lucky few with housing security due to class (and race) privilege. I have seen my peers without that privilege give up, develop mental health issues, and leave the Penal Colony in droves. I can't blame them; I have done the same.

The crisis of arts funding in Australia is inextricable from decades of privatisation. Consider the degradation of our two closest fields, media and education, and the impact on us. Last year I marked a 25,000 word Masters thesis for \$247 before tax. I'm a Doctor of Philosophy – that was the “award rate” (if there is such a thing anymore for casual university tutors). I wasn't going to short-change that Masters Student, who'd paid \$30,000 for her degree: to do the job properly I had to spend around ten hours on it, ending up with about \$20 an hour. It's a feudal system with Vice-Chancellors on \$1-2M pa, professors on around

\$200,000, and tutors like me who are usually professional artists and writers desperately trying to bolster their income. It's insane. It is exploitation and again grossly inefficient.

Another result of the depredations of an education sector run to a corporate model is that humanities departments shrivel as their value cannot be easily measured with dollars. When our books and art aren't taught not only do we further lose income, new generations grow up not learning about their culture. Choices are safer; fear and self-censorship grow.

A second way I supplement my income is art criticism. I'm lucky to work for Schwartz media, who along with Murdoch pay the best rates in the country. But rates haven't risen in over ten years. At *The Sydney Morning Herald*, they have plummeted. What other profession in this nation can we say that about?? Since the 1980s, through constant bipartisan deregulation, media ownership has slid to a powerful wealthy elite, mostly Murdoch. The integrity of journalism – in-depth storytelling, intrepid investigation - is becoming harder to maintain. As ever, stories about art and culture are among the first to be axed.

Finally, over the decades that I have worked across literature, performance and the visual arts both as practitioner and critic, I have noticed stark differences and growing inequalities. There are many more events, opportunities, research and development projects in the visual and performing arts – see Catriona Menzies-Pike's entry for a most eloquent breakdown of this. There is more diverse representation and more risky subject matter. Literature needs a massive injection of funding, faith and morale if it is to remain relevant, dynamic and truly reflective of our society as a whole. Please listen to us. Please value us.

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