

National Cultural Policy Submission

Gail Jones

Submission for New National Cultural Policy

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Labor government's call for discussion with regard to the National Cultural Policy within the Office of the Arts.

Arts practitioners in many fields welcome Tony Burke's declared wish to address and extend upon the magnificent Whitlam era legacy of Labor commitment to the Arts, and to revisit the 2013 'Creative Australia' initiative, inaugurated under Prime Minister Julia Gillard. *There has never been a better time* to renovate our models of national culture, to direct funding and attention to our cultural institutions, and to reconstruct policy so that it addresses a progressive, energetic, and newly robust conception of our national culture.

This short submission primarily addresses literary culture.

I am an academic and writer, author of nine novels and two books of short stories, translated into fifteen or so languages. I am frequently asked to represent Australian writers and writing at overseas festivals, embassies and seminars across the world. I am currently Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University and Visiting Professorial Fellow in the College of Arts and Social Sciences, at the Australian National University, Canberra.

I have been the grateful recipient of two writing residencies and one 'Senior Fellowship Grant' (last year) from The Australia Council for the Arts. It is no exaggeration to say that the residencies, in particular, made my writing career possible: I was able to take leave-without-pay from my 'day job' for two periods of six months at crucial times in terms of writerly opportunity, morale and practice. Both residencies were overseas and led to international contacts, broader publication and connection with Australian Studies Centres abroad.

I have read the guidelines to the submission but will not systematically address the 'five goals'. However, I do offer practical proposals which are entirely mindful of the guidelines.

1. Acknowledging writers as primary producers

I'm aware of course that *all* cultural agencies will be calling for increased funding. However, I am particularly concerned with the low level of literature investment through state and federal funding agencies compared with other artforms. According to 'Creativity Connects Us', the 2020-21 annual report of the Australia Council for the Arts, literature received only 6% of total funding to the arts.

<https://australiacouncil.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Australia-Council-for-the-Arts-Annual-Report-2020-21.pdf> p17

Literature is a mainstay of the creative and cultural industries, which contributed \$63.5 billion to the Australian economy in 2016-17. Creative arts employ 645,000 Australians and those numbers were increasing before the pandemic. Literature operates in the economy in many and complicated ways, since writers are the 'primary producers' of creative content.

Books provide content for other parts of the economy such as film, television, theatre and opera; they form a bedrock of vigorous resources for the wider economy.

2. Increasing funding for the Australia Council, with specific and designated funding for literature to be targeted.

Writers' incomes are disastrously low and total literature funding at the Australia Council has decreased by 44% over the past seven years from \$9 million in 2013-14 to \$5 million in 2020-1. Literature is the only artform that does not receive infrastructure support through a targeted Government program. Funding has been static or decreasing year by year, and last year, the COVID-19 pandemic damaged local and international initiatives and destroyed supplementary incomes.

Libraries, universities, schools, festivals and publishing are the most conspicuous areas of economic benefit; employment, knowledge, understanding and literacy are all implicated in these areas of cultural production.

Indirect benefits, such as to tourism, are often overlooked in reference to the economic benefits of literature. Our books carry implicit, prestigious reference to a national culture and place. Cross-cultural exchange and understanding are crucial to the literary industries and of inestimable benefit in 'recommending' Australia and its stories.

It is clear that writers are disproportionately disadvantaged. Although essential to the economic benefits of a healthy arts sector overall, writers are less supported by our institutions and infrastructure.

3. Better connecting Literature to the Education sector.

There has been insufficient support for Australian Literature within the academy: under the current wish to renovate the jobs sector through the creative arts there is an opportunity to direct dedicated funds within the education budget to establishing a Chair of Australian Literature in each university (or at least in the Group of Eight, or by application from interested institutions). There are currently two Chairs remaining (the privately endowed Boisbouvier in Melbourne and one at UWA). This initiative could be consolidated by the decision to offer attractive postgraduate scholarships specifically in the area of Australian literary studies. For a comparatively small outlay in budget terms, such a move would signal direct support for Australian reading, writing and research and would be widely celebrated in the education and library sectors.

It is embarrassing to discover that some European universities (in my experience Belgium, Germany, Spain and Italy) study more Australian literature than is offered in our own nation. There are many Centres for Australian Studies in Europe (and in China, 37 at my last count). I was invited with our Nobel Laureate JM Coetzee to Buenos Aires to introduce Australian literature to students at the National University of General San Martin (UNSAM): this was entirely funded at the Argentinian end. These are not just public relations exercises, but assertions of cultural learning and exchange. We need an allocated budget to support such initiatives and to acknowledge and foster global interest in our culture. It might be modelled on the DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service, whose services extend to writers, filmmakers, musicians and visual artists).

4. Recognising literature as labour.

Notwithstanding a few highly publicized commercial successes, most writers truly struggle to make ends meet. The ‘trickle down effects’ – from a sustaining grant, say, to a literary journal – have direct economic benefits to writers and therefore to the wider economy. Most writers’ work is not recognized as a ‘job’; if it were, if there were a definition of ‘writer’ as a category of honourable labour (such as it is, for example, in Germany and France), writers would be eligible for Jobmaker and Jobseeker benefits. This may be ‘blue-sky’ thinking, but I look forward to a future in which forms of precarious labour, like writing, are recognized as genuine labour and not an add-on extra.

5. Literature as foreign aid.

The government of Canada, for example, gifts entire libraries of Canadian literature as part of its aid program (I’ve seen one installed on the campus of the University of New Delhi). This works as a stimulus to the host economy (benefiting publishers and writers) and also to the receiving community, for whom access to books and education may be difficult. It also encourages study of the host culture’s writings and has benevolent ‘soft power’ effects of inestimable worth.

6. Literature as physical infrastructure

Building programs will be necessary to the renovation of the domestic economy post-COVID-19. This is a wonderful opportunity to consider funding ‘literature houses’, purpose-built sites for readings, writer accommodation for local and overseas residencies, places for book-launches, discussion and the general support of literature. The *Literaturhaus* system in Germany, in which all major cities have buildings for writer events, and in which, crucially, writers are paid for readings and appearances, is a wonderful success and helps writers’ incomes enormously. The inclusion of indigenous, regional, rural and community organizations in proposals for ‘literature houses’ would stimulate local building economies and generate community recognition of Australian literature.

7. Creative arts as a potentially productive area of regional economies.

The Regional Australia Institute map of Australia has a tiny space allocated to creative industries (situated around Alice Springs and linked to the indigenous art industry). This strikes me as a radical imbalance and a missed opportunity. A priority for this inquiry could be support for regional initiatives in literature, perhaps through existing library or schools infrastructure, to address creatively matters of both rural innovation and disadvantage. Encouraging workshops in writing, including visiting writers, addressing reading and writing as a creative enterprise for the community as a whole: these could form the basis for an enlivening cultural participation and skills. Dedicated funds in literature for regional, remote and rural communities are urgently required.

8. A Ministry of Culture

The reference group chaired by Julianne Schultz for ‘Creative Australia’ under the Gillard/Crean initiative recognised the need for a Ministry of Culture. Such a ministry exists in most comparable countries and Australia is a signatory to international conventions declaring cultural rights. The ‘Arts’, such a complex and valuable sector, is currently included with other portfolios. Again, this proposal might be regarded as a ‘blue-sky’ notion, but it is a commonplace and efficient designation/structure in other nations, and one that gives the arts a

context in wider cultural considerations. It would recognise formally and structurally that 'creative Australia' is worthy of its own ministerial category.