

Many thanks for the opportunity of joining the discussion on a new cultural policy for Australia, and for the Albanese government's commitment to undertaking this critical work. I am writing as a novelist, a journalist, an essayist, a reader, a mother, and as the immediate past editor of *Griffith Review* where, for four years (2018–2022), I had the pleasure and privilege of working with Australia's finest emerging and established writers, researchers and thinkers to curate, shape and instigate conversations about many different facets of this nation's past, present and future.

This extraordinary job allowed me to mainline the frontiers of creative thought and inquiry in Australia – and by 'creative' I hope to scoop in new, innovative and imaginative work across all the arts sector as well as all disciplines in the humanities and the sciences, delivered in all genres from fiction and poetry to essays, reportage, memoir, and more. It allowed me to take the pulse of Australian audiences' appetites for provocation, for reflection, for epiphany, and for change, and to appreciate those hungers. It allowed me to understand and participate in the stories Australia's storytellers thought most urgent to tell, and the conditions under which they produced them. It allowed me to curate, nurture and facilitate conversations – both on and off the page.

I have worked as a storyteller for more than thirty years, across national media outlets and in my own long- and short-form work. I understand, at that level, the importance of the job, of the contribution Australia's imaginers make to the constant and necessary evolution of our understanding of who we are, who we can be, and our space and potential in the world. Central to that – to all kinds of story-telling – is a commitment to the role of literature in Australia's cultural and national ecology: I would argue that stories told in all forms and genres feed out to every sector of public, private, political, innovative and national life.

In understanding the length and breadth of the potential and reach of storytelling, I hope this new cultural policy will seek to embed literature as a fundamental pillar of its architecture – not only for the sake of writers and artists, but for all audiences and practitioners, and for the children whose role it will be to find ways of evolving in the future we leave them.

The prism of *Griffith Review* not only reinforced my sense of the potential of this kind of work, but also of the importance of it being undertaken. Australia holds the unique position of hosting the planet's longest continuous culture, yet it is still a relatively young nation-state with so many facets of its narrative and its future to navigate, understand and initiate. It finds itself in a world that has reached a fascinating space in terms of the ways meaning is made: the mechanisms of cultural connectivity have shifted from newspapers to radio plays to television and mainstage drama and on to the various silos of social media, with the ebb and flow of music and literature as its ever-evolving soundtrack and the backdrop, now, of vast and fast climate change.

The work of understanding who we are, who we want to become and the resources we have to hand comes first from human imagination – before politics, before policy, before action and systemic change, fundamental as all those elements are. You will receive many submissions about the contribution Australia's artforms make to the economy, and the high levels of engagement of Australia's public with artforms of all kinds. These facts and figures

speak their own important volumes, and the Australian public's consumption of and reliance on Australian cultural output during the pandemic were both exhilarating to experience and enervating to lay alongside the constantly increasing precarity of trying to sustain and support creative life. But [the 'value', for want of a better word, of this work lies way beyond these kinds of figures.](#)

Few practitioners can make a living from their artform – investigating this, the ongoing work of David Throsby at Macquarie University, working now with Paul Crosby and Jan Zwar, will be often cited for you here. When I began commissioning new work from Australia's writers at the end of the 1980s, I was able to offer \$1 a word – then a best-practice but rare figure across Australia's media landscape. One thing to emphasise here, in terms of understanding the increasingly precarious nature of writing on the national stage, is that \$1 a word remains aspirational for many media and creative outlets. Rates are often a fraction of that figure; writers are often asked to write now for free, for 'exposure'. I'm not sure how many other industries have experienced a reduction in their rate of pay across the past thirty years, let alone such a marked reduction. It puts into perspective writers' calls for guaranteed copyright payments, for exploration of projects like the American Federal Writers' Program of the 1930s, the critical importance of public and educational lending payment schemes, and ongoing calls for tax breaks on grants, prizes, etc as baseline considerations.

It's important to recognise and remunerate the work of writing – the commitment, the undertaking, the labour. But as one writer remarked to me recently, this is not just about protecting or augmenting writers' incomes; it's about supporting every link in the chain between the act of writing and the reader who encounters the work, the full range of jobs involved in that exchange, and the fundamental necessity of affording writing and reading their proper place alongside all other art forms. As I watched writers work throughout 2020 and 2021 – and I asked a lot of many of them during that time, for the pages of *Griffith Review* – I was acutely aware of the particular pressures of their profession alongside their continued dedication to mining, assembling and presenting different truths, even in times of separation, deprivation, dislocation and often profound personal and/or pecuniary stress. But it's important to understand, too, that this work is also, in some ways, everyone's work – that writing, literature, storytelling, reading, apprehending intersects at many critical junctures with the worlds of education, both mental and physical health outcomes, and with communication across all forms: professional, imaginative, scientific, journalistic.

Embedding literature at the heart of a new long-term national cultural policy means putting stories at the centre of the national narrative. It means recognising the potential for this to help the bigger national processes with which we are just now – and excitingly – beginning to engage: the step towards voice, treaty and truth as called for by the Uluru Statement; a true reckoning with what's asked of us by ongoing and dramatic climate change; a refocusing on the critical importance of teachers; a stunning expansion of the space held for Australia's First Nations' voices and the celebration of the stories that they tell. Australia holds an unparalleled opportunity of exploring and expanding of a national narrative that can include and be informed by the generosity of the world's longest continuous culture, and there are exciting aspects to explore here in terms not only of what that would mean for Australia in a national context, but also in the international sphere.

Any conversation about creativity or cultural policy – in any country now, but perhaps moreso in Australia – sits in the ongoing shadow of Covid-19. The rate at which Australia cut itself off from the world – the protection that afforded on the one hand, and the stunningly disconnected isolation it afforded on the other – threw into stark relief for many creative thinkers how distant and irrelevant this part of the world could become. I remember speaking to one of Australia’s foremost cultural thinkers at this time about his sense of Australia being a bird in a bell jar, deprived of oxygen. In a precarious space, there is an extra sense of existential threat now in understanding just how quickly this country can be set apart, and this realisation underscores the importance of exporting Australian stories, Australian ideas, Australian knowledge, Australian imagination around the world as never before. Australia is a necessary part of the world’s story with a critical and in many ways distinct role to play in imagining a new way forward in the context of the pandemic as well as in the context of the short, sharp and horrifically destructive processes of invasion and annexation that has brought modern Australia into being.

There’s no question of writers’ centrality to all of this – and there’s no question that there needs to be a broad discussion about the ways artistic work, exploration and output can be supported. For those artists who did find a way to access JobKeeper, this often provided a perfect demonstration of the way a universal basic income could liberate them to pursue [the work it mattered to them to create](#).

This is what we do as storytellers: we find ways to keep stories moving, to keep working, to fund the work we know we need to do and tell the stories we know need telling. To continue a commitment to engender and enable context, complexity and nuance. It was part of the language of *Griffith Review* that that publication acts as a cornerstone for Australia’s literary ecology, and it was extraordinary to fully inhabit and understand that definition through both the work the journal supported and engendered and the writers and thinkers it supported along the way. It was extraordinary, too, to understand that this was one part of the larger ecosystem of the publishing industry, of research institutions, of libraries, museums, galleries and so many other spaces engaged with making meaning – not to mention the presence in that ecosystem of the readers themselves who not only read or borrow books but also engage with them, as with their writers, through festivals and other events, through the breadth of Australia’s media, through their own ongoing engagements with lifelong education.

An ecology, an ecosystem, requires energy and care to survive and thrive. It needs conservation strategies. It needs the resources to recover and improve its distinct features and functionalities. It needs nurture. It needs recognition. It needs commitment to the quest for the biggest picture in terms of how it connects its own space with larger systems.

For a new Federal Labor Government to apply such a prism to the role of literature in this country and its aspirations for the cultural sector, it would not only benefit Australia’s arts sector nor the design and delivery of a new National Cultural Policy. It would benefit all of us, who we are, and what we can become.

With thanks again for the chance of making this contribution.