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SUBMISSION TO NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

The Eleanor Dark Foundation is Australia's foremost institution for the development of literature. Each year, over 200 leading writers participate in residencies at Varuna the National Writers' House, and a further 120 writers participate in online professional development programs. In addition, many hundreds more readers and writers attend literary events presented by Varuna, including the annual Blue Mountains Writers' Festival.

In the three decades since Varuna was founded, earning a living as a writer has become increasingly precarious. Almost without exception, Australia's writers either struggle to survive on an income below the poverty line or are forced to work other jobs to supplement their writing income. Yet, many of these writers represent the very best of Australia's literary culture, receiving significant literary awards for their work. It is a disgrace that such writers – some of the best thinkers and communicators in the country – cannot earn a livelihood from their creative practice.

A refreshed National Cultural Policy needs to reflect on this historical imbalance and acknowledge how federal and state arts bodies have progressively marginalised arts funding for literature. Even though literature is one of Australia's most popular artforms, engaging over three-quarters of the population, literature only receives 4 per cent of Australia Council funding.

Such scarcity not only impacts individual writers but affects the organisations that assist these writers. The Eleanor Dark Foundation continuously struggles to fulfil its remit while remaining financially viable. For example, one of the foundation's strategic goals is to support more writers of diversity – a goal that closely echoes the second pillar of the National Cultural Policy. However, financial constraints force Varuna to charge an application fee for most of its programs and require fellowship recipients to contribute financially to their residency. Such demands are not conducive to inclusivity, restricting the diversity of writers who apply for programs. These financial structures are typical of artist residencies in Australia but stand in stark contrast to how artist residencies are funded in the United States and Europe, where most fellowships do not attract application fees and include a living wage.

This example highlights how 'goals' or 'pillars', no matter how elegantly articulated, are insufficient for creating a sustainable National Cultural Policy. Instead, the Policy needs to include ambitious, practical initiatives and legislation to support its goals. Specifically, it should include:

- A trial of a Basic Income Scheme for artist professionals, similar to the scheme currently being piloted in Ireland.
- A formal review of the way funding allocations are split across artforms, recognising that literature should receive at least 10 per cent of arts funding.
- Recognition that literature is a particularly precarious artform and that priority needs to be placed on ways to provide writers with paid employment, including paid residencies and fellowships.
- An expansion of the PLR/ELR scheme to include digital lending rights.
- Implementation of concessional taxation rates on artistic income earned by writers, composers, visual artists and sculptors, similar to the existing taxation regime in Ireland. Such legislation should include removing the income tax payable on literary prizes and grants.

Thank you for taking the time to read this submission.

Veechi Stuart
Executive Director
The Eleanor Dark Foundation trading as Varuna the National Writers' House and Blue Mountains Writers Festival



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