

National Cultural Policy Submission

PUBLIC SUBMISSION

Hello ... my name is Ken Bull and I live in Brisbane. As an individual and artist I wish to make a submission to the proposed National Cultural Policy, namely to ask that Australia should have a Poet Laureate.

Australia is rare amongst developed nations, if not unique, in not having a Poet Laureate. Reputedly we had one once – a transported convict, lawyer and blackmailer named Michael Massey Robinson who was the first poet published in the then colony. He was an administrative assistant to the secretary of Governor Lachlan Macquarie and was tasked to write poems to commemorate significant events such as the English monarch's birthday, and had his first poem published in 1810. He was later granted two cows from the government herd, in what is reputed to be the first arts grant of this country. Robinson is mentioned in the Australian Dictionary of Biography at Volume 2, 1967 – the link to which is at <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/robinson-michael-massey-2598>.

We have not had a Poet Laureate since, though owing to his prodigious output and his works' public popularity, the late poet Les Murray (1938 – 2019) was often referred to by that title.

The accolade of Poet Laureate should, in my opinion, be given to a poet whose work is of great or significant public interest and importance to the cultural web of this nation. I suggested (and was mentioned in a Weekend Courier-Mail article by columnist Kathleen Noonan on January 10-11, 2009, as suggesting) that *it is recognition that is the key* – and that naming someone as Poet Laureate is not something that would need to be costly upon government coffers. I suggested that the accolade could be given, say, every two years, and that it should not be linked to any requirement to perform (as some countries, notably the UK, require their poet laureates to do). I suggest that investiture of the accolade could either be at a special evening hosted by the Minister for Arts (think Brownlow / Dally M / Sportswoman of the Year/ etc medals and accolades) or it could be part of the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, even on a semi-regular basis if not done yearly.

I would ask the panel assessing the National Cultural Policy to consider the opportunity lost, to honour in her lifetime the great Queensland poet, author, activist and educator (though mostly known for her poetry) Oodgeroo Noonuccal of the Quandamooka/Nunukul people of Stradbroke Island (Minjerribah).

I ask the panel to recall how impressive and culturally-uplifting for that country was the poem "*The Hill We Climb*" written and read by African-American young woman poet Amanda Gorman at the inauguration of US President Joe Biden in 2020. According to The Guardian newspaper, Ms Gorman "stole the show" (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/20/amanda-gorman-poem-biden-inauguration-transcript>). A 2021 Sydney Morning Herald article by author Jane Sullivan ("*Does Australia need a poet laureate? The answer is in*" (<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/does-australia-need-a-poet-laureate-the-answer-is-in-20210204-p56zic.html>)) commences *our* contemplation of the need for a Poet Laureate with an inspiring read of that US 22-year-old's touching of their national psyche.

Most States in the US have Poet Laureates, and many large cities there do. Most nation-states in the world have a Poet Laureate. There's even colloquially a Poet Laureate of the Moon (James Dillet Freeman whose poem "I Am There" was taken and left on the Moon's surface by Apollo 15 astronauts). Yet we haven't had a Poet Laureate in this country's history, except for a talented but fairly questionable character given 2 cows more than 230 years ago. In the immortal words of Gough Whitlam "It's Time" – or at least I think it is – for a Poet Laureate.

Incidentally I wrote to then Arts Minister Peter Garrett, with a copy to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in October 2008. Arts at that stage was in with Environment (and Heritage) - and, like *Clancy of the Overflow*, an answer came unexpected. It was not the nature of the "no thanks" response that was unexpected to me, but the fact it came from a senior official who I googled and found had a water expertise in Environment. Australia can do better than that ... please.

I believe my submission could arguably impact on 4 of the 5 pillars of the 2013 Creative Australia National Cultural Policy, namely:

- **First Nations** – Yes – *eg*, imagine if Oodgeroo Noonuccal had been appointed Poet Laureate, or if some significant contemporary indigenous poet were to be so appointed. Several names spring to mind;
- **A Place for Every Story** – Yes – the investiture of the accolade could be on the national stage at a gala event;
- **Centrality of the Artist** – Yes – it is an individual award;
- **Strong Institutions** – Probably Not;
- **Reaching the Audience** – Yes – media coverage of the investiture and recognition of the artist during their term as Poet Laureate.

Note: You may attribute this submission to me, Ken Bull.

You may publish this submission online and under my name, Ken Bull.

The only other thing that I personally would like to see more done for in a National Cultural Policy is more done for ceramics and pottery – both for First Nations people and their future and existing potteries and galleries and for potters and ceramicists generally.

Thank you – for considering this and for the opportunity to make a formal submission towards future policy.

Regards,
Ken Bull