

# National Cultural Policy Submission

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The arts are central to Australian life. Nearly 200,000 Australians have employment in the creative arts, with another 450,000 working in jobs generated through the cultural industries. Jobs in these industries were growing at twice the rate of overall employment before the COVID-19 pandemic. Without a commitment to supporting these industries, Australia risks jeopardising an asset that defines us as a people and provides work for so many.

As the new minister, Tony Burke MP, has stated, the legacy of Labor governments has been to build cultural industries while that of Coalition governments has been to neglect them. The Whitlam government's active support for the arts lifted Australia out of its cultural dependence on Britain and gave us a distinctive identity. Diminishing this legacy would see us back where we were decades ago, a dependent culture without its own voice. After a decade of negligence under the previous government, Labor now has the chance to build something that lasts.

Writers contribute to Australians' well-being directly, through the stories Australians turned to in great numbers during the COVID lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Libraries became central community hubs during these isolated times, for readers to talk about books and simply find a public space to share experiences and ideas. Writers sought public forums, both directly and through their books, to maintain conversations and stimulate community. Books and writing forged essential person-to-person contact with readers when such contact was most needed, both in the cities and the regions.

A tiny number of writers can live solely off their writing. To supplement their creative work, they teach, give talks, visit schools, use their skills to write speeches and other documents for others, as well as in journalism and other functional literary forms. They are aware that their writing life is part of a web of connections, not just a linear relationship between writer and reader.

I have been in the fortunate position of not requiring government funding in my career. I have published seven novels, most internationally, generating export income and contributing to jobs in the book industry. I have published a further 21 non-fiction books in Australia and overseas. I have ghost-written another 17 books for well-known Australians from sporting, military, business and philanthropic backgrounds. I have worked in journalism and in the corporate sector. In the writing I have practised, there is no 'separation' of the arts from other walks of life, and every part of my work has depended on a network of people to connect me with readers. I am also a current board member of the Australian Society of Authors and a former board member of the Copyright Agency.

It is because I have never required government support that I am so passionately in favour of it. Writers do not, in my experience, expect a free ride. They all want to live off their writing work – it is their chief aim. But not all are able to do so, and here is where public investment in their work can pay exceptional dividends in the future. Many young writers have been able to use early-career grants to spark successful careers where they have never

taken another cent in government funding. A little bit of early stimulus goes a long way. Many mature Australian writers can point to how a grant when they were young allowed them to produce the first seeds that flourished into commercial successes later in life, and multiplied into jobs for others in the publishing industry, in film, television and elsewhere. Appearing at festivals, contributing to public discussion, writing for literary journals, winning prizes if they are lucky, taking up writers' residencies, mentoring and teaching, adapting their work for other cultural forms – these are all a part of the writer's life.

A new National Cultural Policy cannot look at writers or other artists in isolation. Merely to fund writers to produce work in the hope that they can one day find readers is a speculative endeavour and less than a National Cultural Policy should be aiming at. Instead, writers are part of a large ecosystem that includes research, publishing industries, libraries and of course readers, who come to writing not just through buying books but through attending literary festivals, reading reviews in literary media, hearing writers speak in media of all kinds, and encountering writers through education.

If a new Labor government wants to rebuild a sustainable Australian literary culture, it would do well to examine the totality of this ecosystem. Individual writers might need isolation to do their work, but their books exist in connection with a long pipeline that eventually brings them to readers. An effective cultural policy would focus on supporting not just the writer and the reader, but every link that joins one to the other.

Such a policy supports not just the act of writing where it is needed, but stimulates flow-on employment, benefits the regions where thousands of arts workers live, and rebuilds an industry that remains a legacy of past Labor governments – all while providing the underpinnings for a culture that will add immeasurably to Australians' sense of self and to those hundreds of thousands of Australians to whom the arts give inspiration and employment.

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