

Tuesday May 12th, 2026

Dear Minister Burke,

I am writing to you as the co-owner of Whileaway Books & Coffee in Port Douglas, Queensland, a community bookstore and café that has operated for more than 20 years.

Whileaway is more than a retail business. It is a gathering place for locals and visitors alike. It is where families bring their children after school, where tourists discover Australian writers while travelling through Far North Queensland, where readers meet over coffee, and where conversations happen that simply do not occur inside an algorithm driven online marketplace.

Independent bookshops are part of Australia's cultural fabric, yet the current market conditions make operating one increasingly unsustainable.

The greatest issue facing independent booksellers is the complete erosion of meaningful retail pricing. Large online retailers and major chains now routinely sell books at, or near, wholesale cost in order to drive traffic, dominate market share, and subsidise losses through unrelated revenue streams. Amazon in particular has fundamentally shifted customer expectations around pricing in a way that small businesses simply cannot compete with.

A local independent bookstore cannot survive selling books at the same margins as multinational corporations that operate massive, automated warehouses, international tax structures, and low overhead fulfilment systems. A bricks and mortar business carries staffing costs, rent, electricity, insurance, community obligations, hospitality wages, local council fees, and the day-to-day operational realities of maintaining a physical cultural space.

Customers understandably compare prices online without recognising that an independent bookstore is expected to provide an entirely different service and experience. We are expected to curate thoughtfully, employ knowledgeable staff, support local authors, host events, maintain welcoming spaces, and contribute to the social life of our town, all while competing against businesses that treat books as loss leaders.

We have attempted to operate online ourselves, as most modern bookstores are expected. However, the reality is that independent online bookselling in Australia is virtually a dead market when competing against corporations willing to sell books at near printing cost. Small businesses cannot sustainably absorb freight, staffing, warehousing, transaction fees, and fulfilment costs while competing against heavily discounted pricing models backed by multinational scale and logistics networks.

The result is devastating. Like many independent stores across Australia, we now employ fewer staff than at any point in our history. We charge more for coffee than we would ideally like to, simply to help subsidise the cost of operating a venue that cannot survive on book margins alone. We constantly balance community value against commercial survival.

**Without reform, Australia risks losing the very places where reading culture is nurtured.**

What is most frustrating is that Australia is behind much of the developed world in recognising books as culturally significant goods deserving of protection.

Countries including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan, and South Korea have implemented fixed or regulated book pricing systems that prevent excessive discounting of new release titles. These policies exist because those governments recognise that unrestricted price wars ultimately destroy independent bookselling infrastructure, reduce literary diversity, centralise market power, and harm publishing ecosystems long term.

France's Lang Law, for example, restricts discounting on books to protect independent retailers and preserve cultural diversity. Germany maintains fixed book pricing nationally. These countries understand that books are not merely commodities to be discounted endlessly in pursuit of market domination.

Australia, by contrast, allows deep discounting practices that render publisher recommended retail pricing almost meaningless. When four out of every ten books are effectively sold at or below sustainable margin, the entire pricing structure collapses. Publishers cannot realistically continue increasing RRP's to compensate, nor should readers bear that burden.

Australia is also one of the few developed nations still applying GST to books. This is regularly embarrassing when international visitors enter our store and discover books are taxed here despite being GST or VAT exempt in many comparable countries. At a time when literacy rates, reading habits, and local journalism are under pressure globally, taxing books sends the wrong message entirely.

Independent bookstores deliver enormous cultural and economic value relative to their size. We support Australian authors. We activate main streets. We employ locals. We create safe community spaces. We encourage literacy in children. We host conversations and events that strengthen civic life. These outcomes cannot be replicated by offshore online retailers.

We strongly support meaningful reform measures that would allow independent booksellers to survive and contribute more fully to their communities, including:

- **Examination of minimum pricing or discount restrictions on new release titles, consistent with successful international models.**
- **GST reduction or exemption on books.**
- **Tax offsets or operating relief for independent bookstores facing increasing commercial pressure.**
- **Investment in Australian literary and bookselling infrastructure.**
- **Grants to support author events, reading programs, community workshops, and literary initiatives.**
- **Greater scrutiny of anti-competitive pricing practices within the book industry.**

Whileaway Books & Coffee has proudly served Port Douglas for more than two decades. We want to continue investing in our community, employing locals, supporting Australian literature, and maintaining a welcoming cultural space for residents and visitors alike. But without structural change, independent booksellers will continue disappearing from Australian towns and cities.

Once these spaces are gone, they will not easily return.

I urge the government to recognise independent bookstores as essential cultural infrastructure and pursue meaningful reforms that give small Australian booksellers a fair opportunity to survive in an increasingly distorted and unpredictable marketplace.

Yours sincerely,

Jon Lovett  
Whileaway Books & Coffee  
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