

Dear Minister Burke,

We are writing as booksellers to urge the government to include meaningful support for local bookshops in the new National Cultural Policy.

Our bookshop, South Seas Books, has operated in Port Elliot, South Australia for 17 years. We are located in a small coastal town that has a supportive local community and also has many tourists and visitors to the area. We employ 6 local staff and have always employed local people and like to support local writers. We run a number of book clubs at the bookshop after hours which is a nice way to bring people from the community together in a literary context. We have always donated prizes for the writing competitions at the local agricultural show. We have a history of conducting author events and have plans to increase these in the future, if we were able to secure the resources to do so.

We do not consider our bookshop, or others like ours, solely as retail businesses. While we operate to make a profit and earn a living, this is not our sole aim. Bookshops like ours are community gathering places where Australian stories are discovered, where children fall in love with reading, and where literary careers begin. Yet every year we learn of bookshops closing, undermined by online giants and discount chains that we see selling books at 40–50% below recommended retail price. It is common for customers to phone and ask what price a book costs and ask if we will price match an online seller. We are too small a shop to do this and it also reduces the experience to purchasing a commodity, ignoring the cultural knowledge and experience available through our shop and staff. Staffing has become more expensive but this is not something we can or will cut further without fundamentally changing the nature of what we offer and do. It is increasingly difficult to make a living and some weeks after staff are paid, I am unable to draw a wage for myself. We used to hold more events at the store but now are mostly only able to support authors at library events. We cannot afford to provide staffing and refreshments for an event that we run at a loss.

We've learned that Australia lags behind comparable countries in protecting its book retail sector. France, Italy, the UK, Germany, and more have introduced proven measures - discount caps, tax offsets, and rates relief - that have stabilised their independent bookshop sectors. Australia should do the same. I support the Australian Booksellers Association's call to:

- Fund establishment of a skills training and certification program development and delivery to professionalise the industry, creating recognised career pathways.
- Establish an Australian Independent Bookshop Tax Offset (AIBTO): a refundable tax rebate on core operating expenses including labour, occupancy and technology costs, and purchases of Australian-authored titles.
- Examine the feasibility of restrictions on deep discounting of new-release Australian titles, aligned with established European models.

- Invest in refreshing legacy data systems across the Australian book supply chain.
- Support an Australian Book Voucher Program, redeemable at local bookshops nationwide.
- Fund ongoing grants to support bookshop event delivery including author events, book clubs, workshops, story times, and other community programs.

Sarah started the bookshop because of her love of reading and sharing those stories with others. Sharing a love of reading with customers and staff is still the best part of bookselling for her, as well as watching young staff members find a place for themselves in a cultural business. Increasing costs and low margins as well as the unending paperwork do make bookselling a difficult prospect. We and all of our fellow booksellers work hard and for long hours for little financial reward. While none of us that we have spoken to entered bookselling to make a large amount of money, it doesn't seem unreasonable to be able to make a living. Competing pressures from online and discount stores make this difficult.

The measures proposed by the ABA are modest, internationally proven, and would deliver significant cultural and economic returns. I urge the government to act. Local bookshops are irreplaceable - but without support, more will close and the sector will become dominated by those who have no real interest beyond the bottom line.

Yours Sincerely,

Sarah Taylor and Mark Laurie

*South Seas Books & Trading*