

Submission for National Cultural Policy

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The arts are central to Australian life. It is a multi-billion dollar industry employing hundreds of thousands of people. Without a commitment to supporting these industries, Australia risks jeopardising an asset that defines us as a nation and provides work for so many.

Traditionally, the legacy of Labor governments has been to build cultural industries. 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. The current National Cultural Policy has taken the first steps to build something that lasts.

Writers contribute to Australians' well-being. Libraries are central community hubs, for readers to talk about books and simply find a public space to share experiences and ideas. Books and writing forge a person-to-person that is unique and essential.

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 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. 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.

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. Many mature Australian writers can point to how a first grant 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.

The National Cultural Policy cannot look at writers or other artists in isolation. 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. The totality of this ecosystem must be the focus of the National Cultural Policy. An effective cultural policy supports not just the writer and the reader, but every link that joins one to the other.

Books, writing, publishing and reading are integral to Australian life and should be funded to a level that recognises their importance. This is an industry that adds 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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