

National Cultural Policy Submission

Ailsa Piper

Submitted: As an artist

To the Minister for the Arts

Hon Tony Burke MP

From Ailsa Piper, writer

Regarding the renewal of our national cultural policy

Dear Minister,

Thanks for the opportunity to make a comment/contribution to your thinking about the new policy. I'm very hopeful.

I have made my living as an artist - writer, performer, director, workshop leader, mentor, board member and interviewer - for over forty years, and in three states. In that time, I have seen Australia's support for, and understanding of, the arts wax and wane with successive ministers. My feeling, as a partisan observer, is that you have inherited a landscape that is as arid as I've known it in terms of support, but as vibrant as it has ever been in terms of maturity of artistry. But there are gaps...and I'd like to point to the one I see most vividly.

Writing underpins almost every art form, and yet it is consistently overlooked. I was heartened when you appeared on Q and A, at the beginning of your tenure, and spoke so passionately about the arts. It's clear you are a genuine believer. But the make-up of that panel seemed to me to display vividly what is at issue with support for the arts in Australia. Let me refresh your memory. It consisted of -

Two arts ministers - past and present.

Two musicians.

And a cook/TV presenter/commentator.

Where were the writers - our big thinkers, our literary heroes, our problem-solvers?

Where was the First Nations representative?

Where were the playwrights and choreographers?

Where were...

Of course no panel can be all things to all people, and the list of people omitted could continue for lines and lines, but then, I have another question.

Why two politicians?

I realise you didn't make up that panel, and that the ABC tries to give equal space to both sides of politics, but if you consider the make-up of committees (and I have sat on many arts boards, always

the lone practitioner) and funding panels, they often do what this panel did in terms of reflecting the experience of artists, which is that the creators, the generators, the makers, are not being heard, seen, recognised or...perhaps as a result, funded sufficiently or appropriately.

Writers can - and do - exist on little more than air, much of the time. But is this something of which we should feel proud, and which we, as a nation, should require of them? How many fall by the wayside as a result? And is it something that demonstrates our priorities and ingenuity, when countries like Ireland or France build in tax incentives and other creative innovations in order to keep their story-tellers thriving, and exporting their culture to the world?

As the cost of living goes through the roof, and artists literally weigh up whether they can afford to have a family, I ask you - what will be the cost of living for our country, if we lose generations of story-tellers?

I have worked as an actor in major theatre companies and in television. I've directed plays. I've been a script doctor. I've narrated audio books and mentored many young theatre makers. During that time, I've been the direct and indirect recipient of support via theatre boards and film funds. But in my more recent incarnation as a full-time writer, I've observed with amazement the dearth of opportunities for literature practitioners. Ongoing support structures favour companies and organisations. Writers are often outliers and individuals - they don't always "fit" or work inside structures. Yet without them...it's unthinkable. No "literature," sure. But that doesn't just mean big books for grown-ups! I'm talking plays, operas, kids books, songs, albums, dances, films, cross-media forms...

Well, I don't need to tell you. I sense that you understand, and for that I'm grateful. So, I'm writing to you to urge you to look to the funding of literature before you look to institutions and buildings, and to consider how we can keep alive our story-telling culture and its big, bold, creative thinkers.

Thanks for your care.

Ailsa Piper