

A National Cultural Policy Submission for Reading and Literature

From Caro Llewellyn: Author, occasional journalist, former Artistic Director (Sydney Writers' Festival; PEN World Voices Festival, New York; Festival des Écrivains du Monde – World Writers Festival – Paris, France) and publishing executive. *The Australian's: The List: 100 Arts & Culture 2022*

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion about a National Cultural Policy. My submission can be published.

As I write to you today in my personal capacity as a writer and world-recognised artistic director of large-scale literary festivals, Booker Prize-winning author and my former boss and friend, Salman Rushdie, is recovering in a hospital bed with "life-altering injuries" after a violent attack against him. Salman's assailant – a 24-year-old man from New Jersey – was unknown to him. Salman's provocation? His writing.

Democracy and Literacy

UNESCO (2009) defines education as a fundamental human right intrinsically important for human development and acknowledges that literacy is an inextricable component of education, and an essential tool for pursuing other human rights.

We know literacy provides a fundamental step in building context, comprehension and understanding and when children miss foundational steps in their literacy journey, there are lifelong ramifications. Low literacy rates mean higher incarceration, domestic violence, drug addiction, and the erosion of social cohesion and poor health outcomes.

Without literacy, citizens have no voice in our democracy.

A new report by the Australian Institute, states the wealth of Australians has grown by 302%, or \$9.5 trillion, over the past 33 years. Yet, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, nearly half of Australia's population lacks minimum literacy skills.

Indigenous Literacy Priorities

In remote areas of Australia, some 70% of First Nations adults have low literacy. How can we say we want to put First Nations First when we don't ensure all Indigenous Australians have the basic human right of being able to read and write?

We need a national cultural policy that addresses the critical issue of literacy in this country for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is critical we make a bold commitment to resource schools and equip teachers to ensure every Australian can read and write.

Adult Literacy

We know there are hundreds of thousands of adults who have fallen through the cracks of the school system, who are disadvantaged on a daily basis and feel shame and embarrassment because of their illiteracy.

We need positive advertising campaigns and programs that take away the shame associated with illiteracy in adults and to provide community level programs to offer opportunity and hope to those who missed out at school.

Australian Books in Australian Schools

We need to teach the works of Australian authors and their books in our schools. When I went to

school, we actually *read* books. Now kids in school watch movies of books. If you want to be a runner, you have to run. If you want to be a reader or a writer, you have to read, and you have to write. How can we understand our country if we don't read the books of great Australian authors?

Writers in Residence

Getting writers into schools and getting students to off-site programs is both a pathway for young people to reading and writing and a much-needed paid opportunity for authors. Employing a paid artist-in-residence in every Australian school and library would embed a member of the school community dedicated to fostering blossoming creativity. Not only will this provide jobs for many writers, it will also shine a light on the possibilities offered by a career in the arts, and help young people develop the creativity and skills that will be so integral to our collective future.

Of course, writers could be enlisted to great effect working in other institutions – health, aged care, prisons etc. It is known that people with culture as part of their institutionalised programs flourish and have better long-term outcomes. Writers programs in prisons I have seen and been part of have been highly successful and greatly improve the lives and outcomes of inmates.

Major Institutional Funding

Recent cuts to the National Library of Australia budget have seen the Library's funding reduced from \$61 million funding this year to just \$47 million in 2025-26. The National Library is a critical foundation stone of Australia's public culture. These cuts will erode the Library's capacity and standing and diminish our national cultural identity and pride.

Universities

Continual increases to university fees for arts and humanities courses are a significant barrier preventing aspiring cultural practitioners and professionals from developing their practice. Without the opportunity for new talent to learn and develop, we run the risk of never being world-leaders in the arts, and our cultural institutions will suffer under poor management.

Support for Individual Writers

Literature entertains, educates, and delights millions of Australian readers. A strong culture of writing is fundamental to a strong culture of literacy, and to building empathy across divides of class, culture, and lived experience.

Yet, across all art-forms, writers are among the lowest paid creatives and literature currently receives the least government funding. We need stronger, ongoing support for writers, enabling them to pursue long-term sustainable careers. A 2020 Australian Society of Authors survey of 1400 Australian writers found almost 80% are earning less than \$15,000 per year, with 49.7% earning between \$0-\$1,999 per year.

Over the past years, literature funding at the Australia Council decreased by 44% from \$9 million in 2013-14 to \$5.1 million in 2018-19. Reduced book prices from the arrival of global conglomerates such as Amazon undercut writers, booksellers and publishers, meaning less publicly derived money to sustain the industry outside government support.

Writers are central to the fabric of Australian life and our national identity. Australian authors are innovators, international success stories and export earners. We celebrate these attributes in sportspeople and entrepreneurs: we should be loudly promoting them in our writers.

In all other professions, the expectation that work is valued and paid for is unquestioned. At a time when there is a pressing need for increased diversity and plurality of perspectives in Australia, we risk publishing becoming the domain of the privileged few who can afford to write.

Universal Basic Income

If we were to introduce a Universal Basic Income for artists, we would ensure a greater diversity of voices were being heard. Ireland, for example, is instituting a scheme to support up to 2000 artists with €325 (\$490) a week for three years. In announcing the program, Irish Arts Minister Catherine Martin says she “wants the arts to not just to recover [from the pandemic], but to flourish.”

Digital Lending Rights

The federal Public Lending Rights schemes are critical and, in 2022, will distribute some \$23 million in life-sustaining support to authors and publishers. The Schemes are wonderful, but without electronic lending or e-book borrowing rights, authors and publishers are missing out on the full-due of their work.

Lessons from France – Reimagining Thriving Independent Bookstores

The Australian book industry provides clear economic benefits to the nation. More than 7000 titles are published annually, generating \$2 billion in revenue, investing \$120 million in Australian books and their promotion, employing 20,000 Australians. Yet, price cutting from Amazon, Booktopia, and large chains such as Woolworths has seen the closure of many beautiful local bookstores and threaten the industry.

In France, where I worked for three years, there is a strong network of independent bookstores that bring life to small and large cities alike. In 2009, the French government implemented the “Librairie Indépendante de Référence” (Recommended Independent Bookshop). In order to qualify for the LIR label, which is valid for three years, bookshops must fulfil six conditions, including: the bookshop plays an important cultural role in the community; that it has employees who contribute to the quality of the service and that the bookstore’s owner be responsible for buying stock etc.

Bookshops with LIR designation receive tax breaks and special subsidies, including interest-free loans for store improvements and money to support readings and events. Initially, just €500,000 were designated for the LIR-related projects. So successful was the scheme that in 2013, another new plan to further “shore up” independent booksellers, was introduced.

Youth Initiative – A National Culture Pass

France's new culture pass for 18-year-olds has had a trial run in 14 areas of France and is now going national. Some 800,000 teenagers can now download an app and get €300 (\$AUD451) pass to be used for tickets to the cinema, museum and theatre, or to buy books, art materials, dance courses and instruments or an online subscription.

Arts Boards – They All Look the Same

We recognise a lack of diversity on the Boards of our cultural institutions. If there were paid positions for people on arts Boards, it would lift the calibre, diversity, and success of our major cultural institutions.

I very much look forward to the outcomes of your deliberations and thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to your thinking.

Sincerely,

Caro Llewellyn