

National Cultural Policy Submission

Richard Flanagan

Submitted: As an artist

SUBMISSION TO NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY (LITERATURE)

RICHARD FLANAGAN, writer

The treatment by successive Australian governments of Australian writers would rate as among the worst in the developed, democratic world. No other developed country of which I am aware provides so little in the way of support or recognition or has a state that treats its writers as poorly as Australia.

Yet other than contemporary music, Australian writing is paradoxically the most successful of Australian art forms. Across region and class it is more popular with its own national audience than film, performing arts, or visual arts, and also far more successful globally, both in terms of sales and international critical standing.

But it is in trouble. Independent bookstores are a declining sector of the market, down to 25%, while online sales have increased to 20% in the last two years. Publishers are expected to consolidate in coming years and small publishers close. And the impact is being felt by established writers who can no longer get published, the important old titles that fall out of print and the important new writers who are not making it into print in the first place.

The book industry pays taxes and rates and wages and employs about 20,000 people— or half the number that are employed in thermal coal mining. It is not insignificant. Yet, effectively, books are an unsubsidised industry without state support, perhaps the only unsubsidised industry in Australia. The backbone of that industry, writers, make \$12,000 a year on average. That's a national scandal. Yet the total of direct grants by the Australia Council in 2020 to all Australian writers was just \$2.4 million.

Ponder that number. \$2.4 million. It's a shameful figure. It's not even four times what Scott Morrison paid Barnaby Joyce for just one unpublished report on the drought (\$675,000), sent in the form of text messages. Why are Joyce's unseen words worth so much and ours so little? \$2.4 million is not even 1/400th of what Australia has been spending annually on offshore refugee centres such as Manus Island. That annual billion dollars has significantly damaged Australia's good name globally. Australian writers routinely give it a good name. Go figure. I can't.

Literature policy in Australia has been framed for fifty years in terms of the Australia Council. Yet the Australia Council is a disaster for writers and for literature. Funding and the politics of funding within the Australia Council is dominated by performing arts, the lion's share of funds goes to performing arts bodies, and it is essentially a performing arts grants body. It's time it was recognised as such and literature split from it.

This is not to criticise the support other art forms get but to ask a necessary question: why is this unjustifiable situation with regard to writers allowed to continue? That this has happened, that the situation has demonstrably worsened over the decades relative to performing arts, and that it has happened in spite of a succession of highly committed, hard-working and supportive Australia Council literature officers proves only further that

the Australia Council is a structural dead end for writers and can only continue to be so, worsening their condition rather than improving it.

Worse, there are numerous key issues for writers that go way beyond grants in their import which the Australia Council cannot address because it lacks broad based expertise and, critically, is not allowed to have an advocacy role. The Australia Council directly refused to advocate for writers to the government during the last parallel importation debate because it was outside their charter to do so despite writers, publishers and booksellers being united in agreement that the proposed reform would destroy Australian literature.

At a recent online seminar organised by the Australia Council, senior bureaucrats denied this is now the case. But are they seriously suggesting that they know and understand the concerns of writers and that they are in a position to routinely present the concerns of writers to other agencies and departments including, but not limited to, Treasury (taxation), Foreign Affairs (lack of overseas support which is *de rigueur* with other countries), Education (the vital issue of curricula in schools and tertiary education), to say nothing of retail policy and other areas?

What is needed is a dedicated Australian Book Commission (for want of a better title) which takes over the grants function of the Australia Council, is given an advocacy role within government, and the board of which contains representatives from the Australian Publishers Association, the Australian Booksellers Association, and the Australian Society of Authors at a minimum, and not the political flunkies who have routinely disgraced so much of the Australia Council's board and not one of whom presently is a writer.

This body should be combined with the Copyright Agency (CAL) and take on CAL's role of both collecting and distributing copyright fees and making grants to literature (now almost at a comparable level to the Australia Council), thus providing the necessary administrative and financial base for such a Book Commission. Funding needs to be significantly increased. The body should be tasked with supporting and growing Australian writing.

The government should also consider supporting an intervention in the book retail market with a method that has proven successful in other countries in supporting writers and national letters. And that's a fixed book price system. In my experience of being published in over forty countries over decades it has become abundantly clear to me that in those countries that have pursued neo-liberal reforms to the market and where book prices are completely deregulated, the bookselling and publishing market have grown increasingly concentrated. The result? Less diversity of books, the collapse of an independent book shop sector and of small publishers, and a growing crisis for their nation's writers and the work they produce. Those countries are essentially the Anglosphere—America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand.

In other countries there generally prevails what is known as fixed book price, a system in which first editions are sold at a fixed price for a certain period, generally twelve

months, before discounting is allowed. This has the effect of levelling the playing field between big retailers, particularly Amazon, and small retailers, the chains and independent bookstores, who get to share in the cream of best sellers. It allows bookshops to survive and grow and with them an independent national literature because there is a larger, more diversified market that supports a greater diversity of books—rather than as at present a shrinking one. There are numerous studies backing these points up with detailed data.

It does not mean books become more expensive. Most books will remain as cheap and continue to get cheaper. But it will mean small publishers will have a larger retail market. It will mean a greater diversity of writers will be published, and, once published have a better chance of surviving, of being nurtured, and prospering.

If the government is serious about helping Australian literature survive and prosper this is the one proven method that will achieve it. To turn the government's back on fixed book price is to turn its back, yet again, on Australian writing, and on Australian writers. To virtue signal about supporting Indigenous writing or women's writing or LGBT+ writing but offering no more than a redistribution of the few scant bones tossed at writers through the Australia Council portcullis is to fail everyone. It is to play into a culture war without end, where all that alters with each passing iteration of national political power are the names called when throwing the scraps to the beggars at the gate. Writers deserve better and they have earned the right to demand more.

And yet I write this with little expectation real change will occur and fearing that what will prevail are bureaucrats' concerns and not those of the writers for whom they will claim to be speaking. And that will be a tragedy. Australian literature is an enormous achievement against the odds and, in recent decades, with almost no government support. It has, in the main, been created over the last fifty years by writers, publishers and booksellers. But if it is to continue to be successful it needs support.

In 1975 there were, according to a speech made in that year by Gough Whitlam to the ASA, only twelve Australian novels published, with many of the nation's leading writers living in exile. We can go back to that time or we can seek to build on the foundation of what has been a golden era to strengthen our literature, to help writers from diverse and oppressed backgrounds succeed, to enable more to make a life of good work rather than be forced to quit, to allow all writers a modicum of dignity in pursuing their vocation and know—and this is far from unimportant in our culture—that they are respected.

For the first time since the 1970s, the position of writers is going backwards and with it Australian literature. I hope the government and the minister recognise the opportunity they have created rather than squandering it, that in raising the hopes of many with its rhetoric and by asking for these submissions that they do not then dash them. There is so much possibility waiting to be realised, so much wonder, and not just for writers but for us all as a people. But for that to happen the government must act decisively.