

# National Cultural Policy Submission

Shey Marque (lead), Gillian Clarke, & Blake Innes, WA Poets

**What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:**

## **First Nations**

The 'We Are One' catch phrase has been problematic. The official national narrative creates too linear a path towards an Australian Identity, and potentially sidelines many issues still facing Indigenous cultures. Having First Nations centrality, as we view it currently, is an ideal difficult to achieve without positioning their culture as 'heritage', thereby trapped in the past, and an 'inherited' commodity.

Furthermore, using First Nations culture as central in a white settler narrative in order to benefit Australia economically by marketing it to the world can be viewed as appropriation. If we need to appropriate another culture in order to promote the Australian identity as 'unique' then we still have a problem. A major challenge for our organisation in the past has been maintaining engagement with First Nations writers and attracting audiences. There is a challenge and opportunity now to present First Nations artists as hybrid, complex and dynamically evolving identities in order to improve the ways of listening in audiences both within Australia and overseas.

Specifically, First Nations could be represented via their own language version of material presented and coupled with the dominant language, English, we can evoke a belonging to country with the oral tradition from which this country and all countries' art forms are created.

## **A Place for Every Story**

The research paper into diversity in the Australian arts and cultural sector, 'Towards Equity' (2021), highlighted the lack of good data on diversity (and intersectionality) but found a general underrepresentation of creatives with disability, Indigenous, women, CALD and older Australians in leadership and decision-making roles. It found a general failure to value diverse voices, that the artistic expression of diverse groups is often subordinated to the mainstream voice.

A decline in available funding for the arts favours the privileged class. This problem is most significant in the literary arts which typically receive the lowest share of arts funding. For example, in 2011-12, the Australia Council delivered \$164m to the arts sector of which writers, publishers and literary organisations only received \$5.9m as compared to over 50% of funding going to music/opera, followed by theatre, dance, visual arts, and literature last. We have an opportunity to redefine Australian Identity by inclusion of diverse voices into mainstream events rather than separately, and by implementing fair representation in leadership roles.

## **The Centrality of the Artist**

Ongoing challenges for all writers include the need to create innovative ways of writing within the framework of an evolving Australian Identity, to engage new audiences, and create bridges between societies while respecting Indigenous and other cultural codes of ethics. In other words, our special role is to critically challenge our ways of thinking and seeing ourselves in relation to others, and our interaction with the social, political and physical environment. We have an opportunity through collaborations to produce new cultural material which may be used to inform arts policy.

Within one's scope as an artist, there is the work, the environment of the work and the accessibility of the audiences to the work and akin to all these requirements is the centrality of the artist to be capable of performing at their optimum. From our poetry circles we have many and varied audience

reaches, and the work is attuned to each environment or not. The artist, in this case the poet, has a deep regard for their being 'heard', and being appreciated both financially and artistically. Culturally it can be sensitive issue to be singled out, and the spotlight shone on you but the quality and calibre of the art may necessity this and we don't shy away from this awarding.

### **Strong Institutions**

Strong institutions will lead the way for the implementation of these visions. Therefore, it is imperative that funding be appropriately allocated with fair consideration to the merit of cultural inclusion. It is important that institutions are also strong in leadership, as well as financially. It is therefore a good consideration to give thought to increasing the training or basic information available to organisation on how to increase this strength in community.

We believe that the guidance must come from this National cultural policy for the good of all well-meaning volunteer groups. These institutions are the grass-roots connection of policy to the people and it is absolutely imperative that they be holistically strong to welcome and nurture culturally collaboration.

### **Reaching the Audience**

Factors that contribute to ongoing participation and engagement in poetry include accessibility, sharing, exposure and listening to live performance. The digital platforms available provide an increased opportunity to reach audiences globally.

However engagement and retention of poetry audiences and readers still presents a challenge. An American study, via 'The Poetry Foundation' (2006), found that engagement was related to the nature of the first exposure to poetry in the classroom. People who were exposed to classical poetry during their schooling tended to prefer to read classical poetry although interest dwindled due to a perception of a lack of relevance to their lives. People most likely to retain an interest in contemporary poetry were those who were first exposed to contemporary poetry during their schooling, and were also more likely to perceive an ongoing relevance. There is an opportunity now to change the Australian English curriculum in schools in favour of contemporary poetry, about issues relevant to teenagers, which should be taught by enthusiastic, knowledgeable and practising poets rather than general teachers. We also need to create opportunities for incidental exposure to poetry for adults to broaden participation by incorporating poetry into media with which they are already engaged, eg magazines, newspapers (including print and online), in public places, and mainstream radio stations.

Across all literary platforms, poetry and the spoken word need heavily promoting as they are very under-subsidised by public agencies and rely on very little money coming from too small pools. Government funding and support is needed more to create opportunities for visionary and ground-breaking creative works in the poetry circles of Australia to be heard and savoured by our growing and enthusiastic audiences. From local pub poetry gigs, to winning the W.A. Premier's Arts Fellowship we need to be able to maintain a presence in front of audiences through public funding.

**Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:**

### **First Nations**

Poetry, as well as other creative practices in the field of Literature, seeks to support the maintenance and transmission of culture by acting as a medium for people to document and perform their lost stories including the many stories of First Nations truths that are currently missing from the national history.

We prefer to view this as a parallel narrative, rather than one that feeds into the dominant linear narrative of national identity. It is of major importance to our organisation that First Nations poets retain their autonomy over if, and how, they intersect with our literary program, and that they are encouraged to tell their stories without being forced into any existing framework. We are investigating ways of achieving that goal.

### **A Place for Every Story**

We value diverse voices very highly in poetry since it is within this medium we typically see things from the writer's perspective and encounter personal truths. By integrating all the different perspectives and ways of being, we will come to a collective sense of self.

Poetry, possibly more so than found with other literary forms, includes a strong live performance component where listeners hear the poet's words delivered through their own voice containing all the emotion and nuances sometimes missing from or misinterpreted in the written word. Multi-voice poetry can unify diverse voices by the sharing differing perspectives of common experiences. We believe this is the way forward to redefining the Australian Identity and to represent more accurately our diverse culture.

### **The Centrality of the Artist**

Poets transmit human values and are the creators of culture. Since the time of ancient Greeks, Poets are philosophers with the ability to shape and reshape the minds of young people through its transmission of sensitivity, emotion and imagination. The Poet creates the heart of society. Our organisation exists to support, encourage, and present Poets to the community and, as such, holds the Poet above all else as central to our projects, events and interests.

### **Strong Institutions**

We work to secure ourselves as a strong organisation to provide the community with a long-term sustainable inclusion and expression. It is critical that arts organisations establish themselves with a foundation that is stronger than the art itself – meaning, the strength of the institution will ensure the strength of the creatives it facilitates. This strength is reflected with a firm understanding of mission and purpose to unite the efforts of all its willing participants.

Like we mentioned earlier, the institutions that deliver the practical elements of this policy must be strong in order to initiate the process of inclusion smoothly and with authenticity. To elaborate further, weak institutions – those without proper financing, egotistical leadership, and failure to expand inclusivity – will not represent the spirit of the policy well and greatly compromise our nation's success of the policy aspirations.

### **Reaching the Audience**

It is important to any poetry organisation that the poet/poem is perceived as relevant to the listener/reader. The audience will consider it worth their attention if they can relate to it and it contributes to their knowledge of the world. We seek to expand our programs and events to present diverse views of social realities and the experiences of ordinary people to increase cultural relevance and public engagement.

The contemporary multimodality of poetry is important in making a shift from verbal readings to perceptual experiences. Our organisation is involved in presenting poetry of wide-ranging modalities including print and digital publication, spoken word performance, recordings of poetry and sound, live readings, either via video, live online forum, and film. These are becoming increasingly important since global lockdowns and have resulted in wider geographical engagement both within Australia and internationally. Digitisation makes it possible for us to combine media in ways not previously possible.