

FINAL VERSION WITH CONFIRMED SIGNATORIES

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12PM THURSDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2015

An open letter regarding the Book Council of Australia

The Book Council of Australia (BCA) was announced by the Prime Minister Tony Abbott in December last year. We agree with the statements made by the Prime Minister on its announcement that books are vital to our culture and to our identity, and we are heartened by the Government's commitment that this new body will ensure Australia's literary sector and its writers are strongly supported.

Nearly eight months later, however, it remains unclear what the Council will do, how it will run, who will be invited to contribute to both its strategy and operations, and how the \$6m allocated to its funding will be attributed. There has been no visible consultation with the industry to date and any proactive enquiries into the policy and strategy behind the Council have gone largely unanswered.

As a group of connected literary organisations that represent more than 25,000 writers and hundreds of thousands of readers around Australia, we write to express our wish to contribute to the formation, structure, purposes and activities of the BCA and to note our concern with the lack of consultation on this matter to date.

This letter puts forward some of the recommendations and aspirations that the sector holds for the BCA that we would have normally expressed in a regular consultative forum. The BCA's best chance of success will be ensured if, in this initial phase, it engages in consultation and close collaboration with the broadest possible spectrum of the sector as it stands.

We hope that the BCA recognises the breadth of Australia's literary sector – the National Writers' Centre Network, writers' festivals across the country, prize-giving organisations, bookstores, critics, schools and universities, literary journals, libraries, digital-only initiatives et al – and that many of these organisations and publications not only feed directly into the wider publishing industry, but are critical to sustaining it for both creators and consumers: developing the capacity of writers, publishers and readers; offering skills and professional development programs; and many publication and employment opportunities.

In addition, we hope that the BCA will recognise the breadth of participants in the sector – writers, readers, editors, publishers, critics, librarians, educators, literary journalists, arts workers, booksellers et al – and that each role sustains the other. In this spirit, we hope that the BCA is governed by a diverse representation of participants from across the sector.

We also hope to see a BCA that is reflective of recent changes to federal arts funding by providing additional support for independent writers, literary journals, groups and small-to-medium sector organisations. We do not wish to see a Council that unnecessarily duplicates

infrastructure of the organisations, publications and individual practitioners it is meant to support.

Earlier this year, Australia Council for the Arts reported in 'Arts Nation: Overview of Australian Arts' (2015 Edition), that reading is the most popular way the arts is consumed in this country. In 2013, 87% of Australians read some form of literature, with over half of those respondents reading weekly.

The Melbourne Writers Festival, in a public statement based on these findings, identified threats to this popular and vital art form that would arise with any changes to federal arts funding including:

- Decreased debate and discussion in literary journals and within festival programs
- Fewer Australian books published by small, medium and large publishers, independent and commercial
- Further reduction in space and opportunity for critical scrutiny and media attention of new Australian writing
- A reduction in Australian content across all education environments, with potential consequences to national literacy rates
- Reduced international connections, including the ability to effectively promote and market Australian work overseas.

It is our great hope that the BCA will be actively seeking to address these issues and actively support increased productivity in these areas. We would certainly agree with public comments that the BCA would also be well placed to coordinate cultural policy and strategy around the future of bookshops and publishing houses in Australia, with a particular emphasis on the cultural value of the book.

In this spirit, we hope that the BCA supports emerging talent – taking a nurturing and developmental approach to the industry – and achieves this by working closely with organisations with close ties to early career writers, readers, editors and publishers.

In reflecting contemporary reading practice, it would also be essential for the BCA to study and support digital publishing practices and innovations; and to recognise a broad definition of the term 'book' – particularly when it comes to Indigenous oral storytelling practices and for writers from culturally diverse backgrounds, including those who communicate and create through Auslan as first language and the adaptation of literary works for screen.

It is our strong belief that the BCA could be a creative, vital and forward-thinking addition to the Australian literary and cultural landscape. Literature and storytelling has always been at the heart of cultural production in this country, and even in the digital age it remains central and needs to be actively and strategically supported.

We have seen innovative approaches to actively encouraging readers in recent years – including 2013 Man Booker Prize winner Eleanor Catton's self-initiated grant for New Zealand writers to be used purely for reading. We wish to see a BCA that recognises the

reader and writer, and their close relationship, and those who foster this relationship, as central to the success of the publishing and bookselling industry.

We write this letter as a strong and united community and we choose to publish it transparently, with the best intentions for the future of the literary industry. We believe that the Book Council of Australia will have an essential and culturally vibrant role to play in supporting and advocating for the future of literature in Australia, but in order to do so it must start by consulting and communicating with this open and existing community, in order to reflect the reality of our industry.

Yours faithfully,

(in alphabetical order)

Affirm Press

Alex Adsett Publishing Services

Archer Magazine

Australian Literary Agents' Association (ALAA)

Australian Poetry

Brisbane Writers Festival

Clan Destine Press

Cordite

Dr Bonny Cassidy

Emerging Writers Festival

Express Media

First Nation Australian Writers Network (FNAWN)

Griffith Review

Island Magazine

Kill Your Darlings

Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA)

Melbourne Spoken Word

Melbourne Writers Festival

National Young Writers Festival

NSW Writers Centre

NT Writers Centre

Overland Journal

Peril Magazine

Puncher & Wattmann

Queensland Writers Centre

Review of Australian Fiction

Scribe Publishing

Seizure

Small Press Network

Tasmanian Writers Centre

The Canary Press

The Eleanor Dark Foundation (Varuna)

The Lifted Brow

The Rereaders

Transit Lounge

Walleah Press

Westerly

Wild Dingo Press

Writers Victoria