

Dear Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull,

CC: Senator George Brandis, Minister for the Arts; Ms Louise Adler, Chair of the Book Council of Australia; Mr Mark Dreyfus QC MP, Shadow Minister for the Arts; Senator Richard di Natale, leader of the Australian greens; Mr Rupert Myer AO, Chair of the Australia Council for the Arts

Re: Open Letter from writers and literary producers regarding the Book Council of Australia formation, strategic operations and investment, and future governance

We write this open letter as a large collective of Australia's writers and literary producers, speaking together as one. This letter concerns the Book Council of Australia and its recent formation and management under both the current Minister for the Arts and the historic strategy groups who advocated for its formation. As key stakeholders in the creative industries that the Book Council of Australia seeks to promote, we are disappointed by the lack of adequate consultation with those Australian writers, producers, editors and publishers best positioned to understand the challenges and hurdles currently facing Australian literary institutions and cultures.

The Book Council of the Arts is currently funded at \$6 million dollars to be distributed over three years. This funding was taken from the operating budget of the Australia Council for the Arts. We see this, collectively, as our funding.

We recognise that funding is not guaranteed to go to any one of us individually, and that no funding model for the arts is capable of serving the diverse needs of all practitioners in the community. Nevertheless, we believe – as we hope that the Minister for the Arts and the Book Council of Australia also believe – that limited amounts of public taxpayer money must be set aside for writers to produce new work and create new projects, and that these serve the interest of Australia's national culture, at home and abroad. This has been the belief of Australian governments, publishers and writers since the formation of the Australia Council over forty years ago.

The Book Council of Australia, as an industry group, sits within the Ministry for the Arts. Although we place no blame on any particular individual and do recognise the inevitable complexities of policy development in arts and cultural management, it has become consistently evident to stakeholders across Australia's literary institutions that both the Minister and the members of the Council have been ineffective in communicating the purpose and values of the Book Council of the Arts. The Book Council was announced by then Prime Minister Tony Abbott in December 2014 and no word of the formal structure of the Book Council was announced until last week. Ten months passed before a term of reference (totalling 400 words) and a list of invitees were announced. We do not believe that this gross procedural delay in the supply of information meets the minimal standards for a funding body interested in supporting cutting edge arts production, or in cultivating competitive Australian arts industries in a global context.

Lack of strong leadership or community consultation from the Book Council also risks damaging our emergent international market. Given the incredible international sales of works like Christos Tsiolkas's 'The Slap' and Hannah Kent's 'Burial Rites', it is disappointing to discover that current literary funding models are unable to adequately support the

professional trajectories for upcoming authors who have the potential to follow in Tsiolkas' and Kent's footsteps.

The Ministry and the Council have also performed weakly in transferring and administering funds, and have already done detrimental work to our literary output for the foreseeable future. The triennial period 2016-2018 will look radically different for readers because writers, editors, publishers and producers have not had access to these funds. The situation is not, of course, beyond repair. A clear, focused, and consultation-based arts policy in relation to literary production could still do significant work in rebuilding our relationship with the Federal Government and its policymakers in the arts. However, some immediate and decisive changes would be beneficial to all concerned.

Firstly, we call on you, Prime Minister, to remove Senator George Brandis from his role as Minister for the Arts, and to find a more suitable candidate within your party. He has alienated the vast majority of constituents within the arts landscape through reforms that are not tangibly grounded in any concrete evidence about which funding models work, how arts funding is linked to future outcomes for practitioners, or how audiences for the arts in Australia are formed. We will not stand by as the Minister for the Arts continues to wreck a fragile yet essential part of the Australian people and sense of nationhood.

We write collectively this as a disappointed literary community, yet we remain hopeful. The Book Council of Australia has good reasons to exist, and we believe that – with appropriate leadership and transparent funding processes – it could lead to positive and high profile transformations for the arts in Australia. As Louise Adler, the Council's inaugural Chair, wisely noted, literature has been the 'poor cousin' to other art forms in Australia, 'receiving only \$9 million of the Australia Council's total of \$199 million in grants.' This figure should be surprising to the Minister for the Arts, given recent findings from the Australia Council ('Arts Nation: Overview of Australian Arts') 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. That's over twenty million Australian citizens who have a stake in literature and its future in this country.

We will no longer stand, under your government, for the smallest amount of funding, when we are delivering quality work to the largest audience in the country.

We call again for George Brandis to be moved out of the Arts portfolio, but we must also question the intentions of inaugural Chair Louise Adler, and communicate that we do not support her in this role.

Louise Adler's conflict of interest as Publisher of Melbourne University Press does not serve the wider industry. Ms. Adler also currently serves as President of the Australian Publishers Association and as Chair of the Victorian State Government's Creative Industries Taskforce and Expert Reference Group, causing one to question how much time she has to dedicate to each role independently of one another.

Ms. Adler has recently engaged in an unprovoked attack on the ABC. Speaking to The Weekend Australian, in an article dated September 5, about leaked details of negotiations regarding the Prime Ministers' Literary Awards, Ms. Adler once again aired grievances that dated back eight months and had been publicly been aired once before. This public behavior is unfitting of the Chair role, and compromises the Book Council of Australia in future

potential collaborations with our national broadcaster. Literature and books have few opportunities for publicity and profile building across all media. To show such dangerous disregard for the ABC – traditionally one of the great supporters of books coverage – demonstrates little comprehension of the relationship between different stakeholder groups in the formation of Australian literary cultures.

The delays with regards to a term of reference, and indeed the announcement of Ms. Adler's role as Chair, which was an open secret in the industry, does not give us faith in the ability of the Council to advise the government effectively on matters of strategy nor policy with any sense of timeliness on such matters. This is a fast moving industry that remains shackled by the procedural failures of national arts policy.

The lack of consultation with the wider industry to date by Louise Adler and other parties involved in the formation of the Council has also damaged confidence amongst writers and readers alike.

This has undermined the position of the Book Council of Australia with writers and readers alike – the creators (writers) and consumers (readers) of the products (books) it purports to be the strategic voice for.

We do not wish to see the Book Council of Australia abolished. Instead, we recommend you and the chosen Minister for the Arts move the Book Council of Australia back to the Australia Council for the Arts, where it can be more effectively managed through the Australia Council's peer assessment practices and accountable governance. The Australia Council has a tested organizational structure that has produced strong results in the past, and is able to communicate its policies and guidelines in an effective manner to practitioners. This would also allow the Book Council of Australia to be informed by strategy and consultation with the literary industry and community. This also would ensure that administration costs are not unnecessarily duplicated, creating greater efficiencies in the arts funding process as a whole.

There is precedence for this. In 2012, the sitting government announced that the administration of the Australian Government Visual Arts and Craft Strategy (VACS) funding (\$22.3 over four years from 2011-12 to 2014-15) would be transferred to the Australia Council. We believe that VACS is roughly equivalent to the Book Council of Australia.

In the words of the media announcement, regarding the transfer from the Ministry for the Arts to the Australia Council, this was part of a broader transfer of functions to the Australia Council that ensured:

- Increased opportunities to consolidate Australian Government arts funding;
- Improve service to the sector;
- Achieve greater administrative efficiency;
- Broaden the Australia Council's engagement across the sector to help deliver the goals of the National Cultural Policy.

This was, of course, outstanding strategy, but also sound economic management. Eventuating reports confirm the success of this strategy and the ongoing impact for the Visual Arts sector. Literature requests the same consideration.

There is an opportunity, within your first weeks of your Prime Ministership, to achieve the same. We ask plainly then that you transfer the Book Council of Australia to the Australia Council for the Arts.

In doing so we hope that you review the Minister of the Arts, the Chair of the Book of Australia and the role of other committee members involved, who have all been complicit in one of the most ineffective strategic investments in the history of Australian literature.

We thank you for your consideration on this matter.

Yours faithfully,