

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS

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## Questions on Notice

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**Addressed to Sydney Review of Books**

**Hearing held on Friday 13 November 2020**

### Question 1

**Mr ZIMMERMAN:** ... My first question goes to a little bit of the historical background of the Australia Council's role, but I note your comment that there is effectively a systemic bias in favour of the visual and performing arts. I'm just wondering whether you have any observations as to how that situation has developed. (p. 27)

Prior to the abolition of artform boards in 2014, the Literature Board of the Australia Council was able to advocate vigorously for writers and literary organisations within the Council. This was particularly important as cultural policy across Australia has traditionally been progressed by advocates and thinkers with roots in the visual arts and performance. This has given rise to policy settings, and particularly to ideas about audiences and impacts, that are geared to live events and spectacles. The slow and complex ways that writers and literary organisations connect with their audiences cannot be measured by simple tools such as box office, and readership – whether for journals or books – needs to be tracked over much longer periods than a single performance or exhibition run. Like many other journals, we find it hard to advocate for the work that we do when our outputs and impact do not register easily. Although we are strong supporters of the arms-length peer review process at the Australia Council, the absence of a vocal Literature Board has meant that our work gets lost in very general measures. It's for this reason that we support this review into cultural policy, and advocate for a dedicated body that allocates literary funding and strengthens our sector.

### Question 2

**Mr ZIMMERMAN:** ... Secondly, you also point to the declining support from the Australia Council for literature, and I'm just wondering whether you could run us through the history of that over the last decade. (p. 27)

In brief, a Book Council of Australia was proposed by the Labor government in 2010 but progress was delayed until 2014, when a Book Council was announced by Prime Minister Abbott. Concerns were raised from various quarters of the literary world about the representativeness of this body, which was to receive \$6million funding, drawn from the Australia Council's budget for literature. In May 2015, substantial cuts were made to the Australia Council's budget, which had an impact on funding for literature, as other artforms. Finally, in late 2015 the Book Council of Australia was quietly withdrawn, but literature funding was never restored. As many submissions to this inquiry noted, literature for funding has sharply decreased in real terms and relative to other artforms. Total literature funding at the Australia Council has decreased by 44% over the past 6 years from \$9 million in 2013-14 to \$5.1 million in 2018-19. The abolition of specific literature programs such as Get Reading, Books Alive and the Book Council has been responsible for much of this decrease. Literature – that is, literary organisations and writers – routinely receive less than 4% of total arts funding allocations. In 2018/19 literary projects and programs received [just 2.7%](#) of the total funding allocated.

I refer the committee to the following resources, that map the decline in funding for literature in greater detail.

Stuart Glover, 'Short Shelf Life' (2015) <https://theconversation.com/short-shelf-life-the-book-council-of-australia-is-stuffed-back-on-the-rack-52382>