

2

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,
TO A DINNER GIVEN BY THE AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF AUTHORS,
SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE, 4 MARCH 1975

I AM HONOURED THAT YOUR COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT HAS ARRANGED THIS EVENING FOR ME. THE LAST TIME I SPOKE AT THE OPERA HOUSE WAS IN THE ELECTION LAST MAY. I WAS IN THE COMPANY OF PATRICK WHITE. SO YOU WILL SEE THAT I HAVE ALWAYS HAD SOME SUCCESS IN GETTING WRITERS ON SIDE. NOW THAT AUTHORS ARE RECEIVING PUBLIC FUNDS, NOW YOU ARE ALL ON THE GOVERNMENT PAYROLL, I EXPECT AN EVEN BIGGER TURNOUT AT OUR NEXT OPERA HOUSE MEETING, WHENEVER THAT MAY BE. IN THE MEANTIME IT IS A PLEASURE TO MEET SO MANY OF YOU PERSONALLY. NAMES FAMILIAR FROM INNUNERABLE DUSTJACKETS AND TITLE PAGES, FROM COUNTLESS AIRPORT BOOKSTALLS AND LIBRARY SHELVES, ARE NOW FLESHED OUT IN LIVING FORM. IT IS GOOD TO BE AMONG YOU.

MY WIFE OF COURSE HAS A MUCH GREATER REPUTATION AS A WRITER THAN I DO. NEVERTHELESS, I TAKE GREAT PRIDE IN THE FACT THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN ABLE TO ESTABLISH THE PUBLIC LENDING RIGHT IN FULFILMENT OF ITS UNDERTAKINGS IN 1972. AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND ARE THE ONLY TWO ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES WITH THE PLR. DENMARK, SWEDEN AND NORWAY ARE THE ONLY OTHER NATIONS TO INTRODUCE IT. WE DON'T NORMALLY TAKE OUR LITERARY AND ARTISTIC STANDARDS FROM SCANDINAVIA - EXPECT PERHAPS IN FILM MAKING - BUT ON THIS OCCASION WE ARE IN THE VANGUARD OF A VERY IMPORTANT REFORM.

FOR YEARS WE HEARD IT SAID THAT THE PLR WOULD BE TOO DIFFICULT TO ADMINISTER, THAT THE LEGAL AND TECHNICAL PROBLEMS WOULD BE TOO GREAT. IT WAS EVEN SUGGESTED THAT GOVERNMENTS SHOULD NOT GIVE ASSISTANCE TO WRITERS FOR FEAR OF COMPROMISING THEIR INDEPENDENCE. I THINK WE HAVE SHOWN THAT THE ADMINISTRATIVE DIFFICULTIES OF PLR WERE NOT INSUPERABLE AFTER ALL, AND I DOUBT IF ANY OF YOU WILL BE EASILY SEDUCED BY THE SCALE OF PAYMENTS INVOLVED. WE DON'T SEE THE PLR AS A PRIVILEGE OR A BENEFIT FOR AUTHORS. WE SEE IT AS A RIGHT. WE SEE IT AS AN OVERDUE RECOGNITION OF SERVICES YOU HAVE GIVEN THE COMMUNITY; A PAYMENT FOR YOUR WORK. MOST OF YOU WILL ALREADY HAVE RECEIVED SOME AMOUNTS UNDER THE SCHEME. LAST WEDNESDAY I AUTHORISED THE FIRST PAYMENTS RECOMMENDED BY THE AUSTRALIAN AUTHORS FUND FOR THE 1974-75 FINANCIAL YEAR, AMOUNTING TO \$440,000 FOR AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS.

OF COURSE THIS IS NOT A LARGE SUM AS GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES GO. BUT IT STANDS FOR SOMETHING IMPORTANT. IT MEANS THAT AUSTRALIA AS A NATION RECOGNISES THE VALUE OF CREATIVE WRITING, THE PLACE OF LITERATURE AND THE ARTS IN A ROBUST AND CIVILIZED SOCIETY. GOVERNMENTS CANNOT CREATE GOOD WRITING OR GREAT ART BUT THEY CAN CREATE THE CONDITIONS IN WHICH ART AND LITERATURE ARE MOST LIKELY TO FLOURISH. THEY CAN REMOVE UNNECESSARY HARDSHIP, THE FINANCIAL ANXIETIES THAT INHIBIT MANY ARTISTS AND WRITERS, EVEN WELL-ESTABLISHED AND SUCCESSFUL ONES.

WRITING IS NOT THE MOST LUCRATIVE PROFESSION, AND THE PLR WILL HARDLY MAKE IT SO; BUT AUTHORS NOW HAVE AN ADDITIONAL AND ASSURED SOURCE OF INCOME FROM THEIR WORK. AND THAT INCOME WILL FLOW TO THEIR DESCENDANTS. I TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO INFORM YOU THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS NOW AGREED THAT PLR PAYMENTS AFTER AN AUTHOR'S DEATH WILL BE MADE TO THE HUSBAND OR WIFE OF THE AUTHOR AND TO ALL THE AUTHOR'S CHILDREN - NOT JUST DEPENDANTS.

OUR OBLIGATION TO WRITERS DOES NOT END WITH THE PLR. IT IS JUST OVER TWO YEARS SINCE I ANNOUNCED THE FOUNDING MEMBERSHIP OF THE LITERATURE BOARD. SINCE THEN WE HAVE DISBURSED ALMOST \$2 MILLION FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF AUSTRALIAN WRITING AND PUBLISHING. OUR TOTAL BUDGET FOR THE ARTS THIS FINANCIAL YEAR IS \$20 MILLION. THIS AGAIN IS A COMPARATIVELY MODEST SUM IN OVERALL GOVERNMENT SPENDING, BUT THERE WILL ALWAYS BE CRITICS WHO SEE IT AS WASTEFUL. SOME PEOPLE REGARD ANY SPENDING ON THE ARTS AS WASTEFUL. I DON'T. I BELIEVE THE ARTS ARE A PROPER, INDEED A PRIMARY, AREA OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY. IT IS NOT SO MUCH THAT PRESENT EXPENDITURES ARE EXTRAVAGANT BUT THAT PREVIOUS EXPENDITURES WERE INADEQUATE AND UNPLANNED. THE ARTS ARE A FIELD IN WHICH QUITE MODEST INVESTMENTS CAN BRING HIGH RETURNS. IT COSTS THE COMMUNITY VERY LITTLE TO GIVE A PROMISING AUTHOR AN INCOME FOR SIX MONTHS OR A YEAR. THE BENEFITS FROM SUCH EXPENDITURE - THE RETURNS TO SOCIETY, AND ONE HOPES TO POSTERITY - MAY WELL BE INESTIMABLE.

THE EMPHASIS IN OUR SUPPORT FOR THE ARTS HAS BEEN ON ENCOURAGING WORTHWHILE PROJECTS, ON DEVELOPING TALENTS, ON GIVING HELP WHERE HELP IS NEEDED - OILING THE MACHINE. TAKE PUBLISHING. IT IS PROBABLY TRUE THAT MOST BOOKS WORTH PUBLISHING WILL BE PUBLISHED ANYWAY. BUT WHAT THE LITERATURE BOARD CAN DO IS MAKE PUBLICATION A LITTLE MORE PROMPT AND EASY. A SUBSIDY CAN BRING DOWN THE PRICE OF A BOOK AND MAKE IT AVAILABLE TO A WIDER AUDIENCE. OUR PRESENT SUBSIDY SCHEME GOES FURTHER THAN THE PRACTICE OF THE OLD COMMONWEALTH LITERARY FUND OF GUARANTEEING A PUBLISHER AGAINST LOSS. I THINK THE LITERATURE BOARD HAS HAD SOME NOTABLE SUCCESSES IN HELPING THE PUBLICATION OF MORE AUSTRALIAN WRITING. IN 1972-73 NO MORE THAN 18 NOVELS WERE PUBLISHED BY THE LOCAL INDUSTRY. SUBSIDIES TO DATE HAVE HELPED THE PUBLICATION OF 21 NOVELS AND 23 VOLUMES OF POETRY - AND OTHERS, OF COURSE, HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED WITHOUT SUBSIDIES. SO THERE HAS BEEN SOME PROGRESS HERE. QUANTITY DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN QUALITY; BUT THERE ARE DEGREES OF QUALITY, AND WORK OF THE HIGHEST MERIT MAY SOMETIMES RESULT FROM ENCOURAGEMENT GIVEN TO EFFORT OF A LESSER OR MOST MODEST KIND.

WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO IS ENCOURAGE A WHOLE NEW CLIMATE IN THE ARTS, A NEW PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARTS IN THE LIVES OF AUSTRALIANS, AS WELL AS GREATER ACTIVITY AND GREATER VITALITY. WE WANT THE ARTS TO PERMEATE SOCIETY AT ALL LEVELS, TO BE AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE WHO WANTS THEM - AND DARE ONE SAY IT - TO SOME PEOPLE WHO DON'T. FUNDAMENTALLY, OUR ASSISTANCE TO THE ARTS IS NOT INTENDED TO BENEFIT ARTISTS THEMSELVES, THOUGH INEVITABLY IT DOES, AND ONE WOULD NOT WISH IT OTHERWISE. IT IS INTENDED AS A SOCIAL MEASURE, PART OF A COMMITMENT TO THE QUALITY OF PEOPLE'S LIVES. NOT THE LEAST OF THE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEPRIVATIONS AT THE HEART OF OUR CONTEMPORARY URBAN MALAISE IS THE INADEQUACY OF ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL STIMULATION; A LACK OF ACCESS TO THE ENRICHMENT AND STIMULATION THAT THE ARTS ALONE CAN BRING. WE DON'T WANT TO BE POMPOUS OR PATRONISING ABOUT SUCH THINGS. IT IS NOT FOR GOVERNMENTS TO TELL PEOPLE WHAT THEY SHOULD LIKE. IT IS, HOWEVER, A RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENTS TO MAKE THE BENEFITS AND REWARDS OF OUR CIVILIZATION - AND INDEED OTHER CIVILIZATIONS - AS WIDELY AVAILABLE AS POSSIBLE. CERTAINLY I REGARD THAT AS A DUTY OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENTS SUCH AS MINE. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC ENJOYMENT SHOULD BE PROVIDED^{AS} READILY, AND AS EQUALLY, AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION OR HEALTH. IT MAY EVEN BE ARGUED THAT THE ENJOYMENT OF THE ARTS IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH.

I HOPE THE ASSISTANCE WE ARE GIVING TO AUTHORS WILL ENCOURAGE A STRONGER INDIGENOUS LITERARY COMMUNITY. IN PARTICULAR, I HOPE IT WILL ENCOURAGE AUSTRALIAN WRITERS ABROAD TO RETURN TO AUSTRALIA. I DON'T BLAME AUTHORS FOR WANTING TO WORK ABROAD; FAR BE IT FROM ME TO DISPARAGE THE IMPORTANCE OF OVERSEAS TRAVEL. FOR THOSE LIKE COLIN SIMPSON, WHO WRITE TRAVEL BOOKS, I SUPPOSE SOME TRAVEL IS ESSENTIAL. NOW THAT WE HAVE THE PLR I MAY BE ENCOURAGED TO KEEP A DIARY OF MY OWN. AS OSCAR WILDE SAID; I LIKE SOMETHING SENSATIONAL TO READ ON THE TRAIN. OUR MISFORTUNE WAS THAT TOO MANY WRITERS WHO TRAVELLED ABROAD PREFERRED NOT TO LIVE IN AUSTRALIA. THERE WAS A CLASS OF EXPATRIATE AUSTRALIAN WHOSE CRITICAL FACULTIES, WHOSE POWERS OF SOCIAL OBSERVATION, WERE SORELY NEEDED AT HOME. WE WERE THE POORER FOR LOSING THEM. I KNOW THAT IN MANY WAYS AUSTRALIA CANNOT PROVIDE ALL THE STIMULATION A WRITER NEEDS; ALL THE EXPERIENCE ; OR ALL THE PECUNIARY REWARDS. NEVERTHELESS, I SEE OUR ASSISTANCE TO WRITERS, IN PARTICULAR THE PLR, AS SYMBOLS OF A DEVELOPING CULTURAL MATURITY. I HOPE THEY WILL BE A PRACTICAL INCENTIVE TO AUSTRALIAN AUTHORS TO LIVE AND WORK IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY.

WE HAVE IN AUSTRALIA A RICH AND REMARKABLY DIVERSE LITERARY HERITAGE. THE LABOR PARTY OWES MUCH TO IT. CONSIDERING OUR COMPARATIVELY SMALL POPULATION, OUR CONTRIBUTION TO WESTERN LITERATURE HAS BEEN EXTRAORDINARY. THE STIMULUS WE ARE GIVING TO THE OTHER ARTS, TO THE THEATRE, AND TO THE FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRIES, WILL CREATE WIDER OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUSTRALIAN WRITERS. THESE OPPORTUNITIES MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO COMPROMISE ARTISTIC STANDARDS. SADLY, OUR REPUTATION ABROAD IS NOT ONE OF HIGH CULTURAL ATTAINMENT. I DEPLORE THE INFLUENCES - IN THE MEDIA, IN ENTERTAINMENT - THAT PERPETUATE A DEBASED AND DISTORTED VIEW OF OUR SOCIETY. ONE OF THE OBJECTIVES OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS UNDER THIS GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE IN ALL FIELDS OF ART; IT IS FOR WRITERS AND PUBLISHERS TO PRESERVE THESE STANDARDS IN OUR WRITING. BE WARY OF THE PRETENTIOUS; DON'T BE SATISFIED WITH THE SLIPSHOD OR THE SECOND-RATE, WITH SECOND-HAND OR DERIVATIVE IDEAS. IF AUSTRALIAN WRITING IS TO HAVE A DISTINCTIVE PLACE IN WORLD LITERATURE IT WILL BE BASED ON AN AUTHENTIC AND ORIGINAL STYLE. OUR BEST WRITING HAS ALWAYS REFLECTED OR EMBODIED SOME PECULIAR TRUTH ABOUT OURSELVES, WHETHER EXPOSING SOCIAL INJUSTICE OR REVEALING QUALITIES IN THE AUSTRALIAN CHARACTER. THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH CRUDE NATIONALISM. GREAT WRITING IN EVERY SOCIETY, ESPECIALLY GREAT FICTION, WHILE DEALING IN UNIVERSAL HUMAN VALUES, HAS CHOSEN DISTINCTIVE NATIONAL AND REGIONAL IDIOMS. IT IS THROUGH SUCH NATIONAL IDIOMS THAT THE BEST WRITING HAS ACHIEVED ITS TIMELESS QUALITY AND BROUGHT US CLOSER TO A DEEPER KNOWLEDGE OF OURSELVES AND OF HUMANITY.

I HOPE I WILL BE FORGIVEN THIS SOMEWHAT PORTENTOUS NOTE. THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE ARTS IS BY NO MEANS THE LEAST TROUBLESOME OF MY RESPONSIBILITIES; IT IS, HOWEVER, AMONG THE MOST SATISFYING. I LIKE TO THINK THAT WE ARE CREATING PRECEDENTS AND ESTABLISHING ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES AND INSTITUTIONS THAT WILL PERMANENTLY ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF ARTISTIC LIFE IN THIS COUNTRY. DO NOT IMAGINE THAT THE THINGS WE ARE DOING - OUR BOARDS AND COUNCILS, OUR SPECIAL GRANTS AND SUBSIDIES - ARE INVULNERABLE TO ATTACK. THEY ARE NOT. THEY MUST BE GUARDED AND PRESERVED. THE CURRENT LEGAL CHALLENGE BY CERTAIN STATES TO THE VALIDITY OF THE REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT DEVELOPMENT SCHEME AND THE AUSTRALIAN ASSISTANCE PLAN HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF MANY KINDS OF ESTABLISHED GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS INVOLVING COMMONWEALTH GRANTS TO INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS. IF THIS CHALLENGE SUCCEEDS THE PLR WOULD BE AT RISK. YOUR SOCIETY, I NOTICE, IN AN EDITORIAL IN "THE AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR", HAS EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE SECURITY OF THE PLR AND URGED THAT IT SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED BY AN ACT OF PARLIAMENT. ACTS OF PARLIAMENT, OF COURSE, CAN ALWAYS BE REPEALED; THOUGH I ACKNOWLEDGE THE FORCE OF YOUR ARGUMENT, I ASSURE YOU IT WILL HAVE THE GOVERNMENT'S FULL CONSIDERATION.

TWO YEARS AGO, WHEN I ANNOUNCED OUR INTENTION TO ESTABLISH THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS AS AN INDEPENDENT AGENCY, I SAID THIS ABOUT OUR GENERAL POLICY FOR THE ARTS:

"THE POLICIES WHICH MY GOVERNMENT WILL PURSUE WILL HAVE A TWO-FOLD OBJECTIVE - THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE AND THE SPREAD OF INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION. WE WILL SUPPORT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMS WHICH PRODUCE, SUSTAIN AND DISPLAY THE TOP LEVEL OF PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN THE ARTS - THE MAJOR THEATRE COMPANIES AND ORCHESTRAS, THE NATIONAL GALLERY AND COLLECTION, AND SMALLER GROUPS AND PARTICULAR PROJECTS OF HIGH QUALITY. BUT OUR SUPPORT FOR ESTABLISHED ORGANISATIONS AND ART FORMS WILL BE BALANCED BY A STRONG PROGRAM OF ENCOURAGEMENT FOR EXPERIMENT AND DEVELOPMENT, AND FOR NUMEROUS SMALLER GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WHOSE ACTIVITIES BRING ENJOYMENT TO MANY PEOPLE...

"VITALITY IN THE ARTS IS FREQUENTLY ACCOMPANIED BY INNOVATION, BY CONTROVERSY AND BY CHALLENGE TO ESTABLISHED CONVENTIONS OF TASTE, BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOUR. ARTISTS NEED PROTECTION FROM UNNECESSARY RESTRAINTS, AND GOVERNMENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO RESIST PRESSURE FROM THOSE WHO ARE DISTURBED BY CONTROVERSY AND CHALLENGE."

THESE REMAIN OUR OBJECTIVES. THE PLR AND OUR OTHER PROGRAMS FOR AUTHORS ARE CONSISTENT WITH THESE AIMS. I COMMEND THE WORK OF YOUR SOCIETY IN HELPING US DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT OUR PROGRAMS. WE DON'T LOOK TO WRITERS JUST FOR ENTERTAINMENT OR ESCAPE, THOUGH GOOD ENTERTAINMENT IS A HIGH AND NECESSARY CRAFT. WE LOOK TO YOU ALSO FOR THAT SPIRIT OF INNOVATION, OF CONTROVERSY, OF CHALLENGE, THAT IS THE BASIS OF ALL CHANGE AND ALL TRUE PROGRESS. AUSTRALIA WILL ALWAYS NEED MORE WRITERS. WE WILL ALWAYS NEED BETTER WRITERS, AND BETTER WRITERS WHO ARE BETTER OFF. I KNOW THE GOVERNMENT CAN COUNT ON YOUR SUPPORT, JUST AS YOU - THE WRITERS AND AUTHORS OF AUSTRALIA - CAN COUNT ON OURS.
