

Coalition for the Defence of Writing & Publishing in B.C.

PRESS RELEASE

Literary clearcut prompts quick response

B.C.'s beleaguered literary organizations are forming the Coalition for the Defence of Writing and Publishing in British Columbia one day after the Arts & Culture branch of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture & the Arts (Hon. Kevin Krueger) simultaneously removed all funding from the Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia (\$45,000), *BC BookWorld* newspaper (\$31,000) and B.C. Association of Magazine Publishers (\$20,000) via phone calls from its executive director Andrea Henning, on October 6.

"Thus far they have chopped off three heads," says Alan Twigg, publisher of *BC BookWorld* for twenty-one years, "but indications are that more heads will roll."

The 50-member Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia, founded in 1974, is the largest regional affiliate of the Association of Canadian Publishers. As the hub of a remarkably diverse publishing industry of mostly small firms, it undertakes extensive business, marketing, promotion and awareness programs such as Resource Tools for Educators, B.C. Books for Schools, a catalogue for Canadian Aboriginal Books for Schools and B.C. Books on BC Ferries.

"Our B.C. publishers are reeling," says ABBPBC executive director Margaret Reynolds. "It is an absolutely bizarre decision. Governments across the country, federal and provincial, recognize the importance of culture to the lives of their citizens. Why invest in this infrastructure then unceremoniously withdraw it?"

BC BookWorld, since 1987, is distributed via more than 900 outlets around the province on a quarterly basis, reaching approximately 100,000 readers per issue. It has been identified by the Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing—in a report commissioned by the BC government—as "the most important cog in the infrastructure" that supports writing and publishing in B.C.

"*BC BookWorld* generates 70% of its own revenues," says Twigg, "So Arts & Culture has chosen to sabotage something literary that is genuinely popular, public-serving, non-elitist and educational. It boggles the mind. We're the focal point for all B.C. books and authors." Twigg got a brief phone call less than a month before his non-profit society was scheduled to renew its 21-year partnership with the provincial government.

Since 1993, the BC Association of Magazine Publishers (BCAMP) has represented the B.C. magazine industry by supporting the talent, knowledge and skills of its publishers. One million people around the world read the 82 member magazines, which include arts and culture, news, business, lifestyle, leisure and special interest magazines.

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“We know there is a recession, and perhaps cuts can be expected,” says Rhona MacInnes, BCAMP executive director, “but 100 percent is shocking. By the province’s own reckoning, the arts sector offers a healthy return on investment, so there needs to be a fundamental shift in the way this government assesses value. Sadly, these Draconian measures are just the beginning. We’ve all been given notice to expect severe cuts to the BC Arts Council.”

Some sectors of the literary economy have already been hurt. “Essentially the B.C. government saw they had a deficit,” says Bryan Pike, executive director of the BC Book Prizes, “and we didn’t have any. So they decided to give us some of theirs! They are off-loading debt onto charitable organizations.”

Although British Columbia has one of the highest book reading rates per capita in Canada, or North America, per-capita support for the literary arts from Victoria has always fallen far short of standards set by Ontario and Quebec. “More cuts to the literary community will be devastating,” says Carla Reimer, Executive Director of the Federation of B.C. Writers, one of the largest writing organizations in Canada with over 700 members.

The literary community is aghast at total withdrawal of funding from three of its integral organizations. “The recent cuts to these organizations are a blow to the entire literary community,” says Hal Wake, director of the Vancouver International Writers Festival. “Our festival is about to welcome almost 100 writers from around the world and it is extremely unfortunate that they will arrive at a time of crisis for so many cultural organizations.”

Some of the province’s foremost writers, such as Douglas Coupland (*Generation X*) and William Gibson (*Neuromancer*) have already raised their voices to protest the provincial government’s proposals for decreasing support for the arts. “As a futurist, someone with some experience in long-range scenario-based corporate and municipal planning,” says William Gibson, “I’ve seen my share of jaw-droppingly shortsighted proposals. But these proposed cuts to support for the arts in BC (almost 90% by 2011) really take the cake. This is governance guaranteed to rot the fabric of our province’s future.”

Brad Cran, Poet Laureate for the City of Vancouver concurs. “Artists and cultural institutions work on already tight budgets, stretching each dollar as far as possible,” he says, “often with a volunteer workforce and underpaid staffers. Now we’re not talking about minor cuts: we’re talking about devastating cuts.

“The fact that this is happening on the eve of the Olympics (with culture as one of the pillars of the Olympic bid) is an added insult and a broken promise to British Columbians.”

It took decades for the province to generate stability for the ABPBC, BC BookWorld and BCAMP. The Coalition for the Defence of Writing and Publishing in British Columbia will be calling for the reinstatement of funding to these three vital organizations—and an end to the anticipated bloodletting that lies ahead.

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