

World

Australia to have first poet laureate since transported British convict

Australia

James Salmon Perth

Australia is set to appoint its first poet laureate, more than 200 years after a former convict held the role.

"This is our soul, this is our identity," said Anthony Albanese, the prime minister, as he announced a A\$300 million (£170 million) package for the arts.

Minimum pay for workers in the arts and a crackdown on fake aboriginal art are also set to be introduced.

There has been an official poet laureate in Britain since John Dryden was appointed in 1668, but there has only been one in Australia, Michael Massey Robinson, an Oxford graduate appointed in 1910 and paid in cows.

He had been sentenced to death in London for extortion, but was transported to Australia instead. After several years composing poems to celebrate the birthday of George III he was sacked.

The country's other notable poets include Bangjo Paterson, who wrote in



Sarah Holland-Batt is a favourite to be the poet laureate

1895 and whose image appears on banknotes. In 1983 his *Waltzing Matilda* became the first song broadcast by astronauts to Earth. Another of the country's great poets was Dorothea

Mackellar, who died in 1968 and is remembered annually in a national schools poetry competition.

The new poet laureate will be the first official one, as he or she will be appointed on behalf of the federal government. Their job will include promoting the discipline of poetry and mentoring up-and-coming poets. A new funding body, Writers Australia, will oversee selection. It is not known how long their term will be or how much they will earn. Among the early favourites is

Sarah Holland-Batt, from Brisbane, who recited a poem about her late father at the event in Melbourne yesterday and said that the move was overdue. "Poetry and literature have been marginal in arts policy... we've been slow to recognise their value, and we have such great tradition of poetry on this continent," said Holland-Batt, whose second volume, *The Hazards*, won the Prime Minister's Literary Award, the country's biggest prize, in 2016.



Unboxing the bust: A collection of paintings arrived at an Amsterdam museum including the *Bust of a Bearded Old Man* by Rembrandt, his smallest known painting

China begs women for more babies

China
Didi Tang Beijing

The Chinese province of Sichuan will drop all birth restrictions after the number of babies born in China fell to a record low last year.

As of February 15, parents among its population of 83 million will no longer have to produce a marriage certificate to register a child. A rule limiting families to three children will also be scrapped. The provincial health commission said the rules would "perfect birth registrations" and "strengthen the population service system".

China reported that its population fell last year by 850,000, the first decline for six decades. *Live births last year dropped to 9.50 million.* Policymakers fear that the population is so unevenly distributed that there may not be enough young workers to support the rapidly expanding elderly population and that economic vitality may suffer.

To cope with the demographic crisis, Beijing scrapped its one child policy, now encouraging all families to have three children. Some local governments are giving subsidies to families with two or three children.

Restrictions on birth registration in the past effectively discouraged couples from having more children than permitted as an unregistered child is not eligible for state education.

Sichuan's new rules may not be the answer to boosting birth rates, however. In an online poll by the local television station, 11,000 people said that they would not consider having children, compared with 1,100 who said they planned to do so.