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## Political bias and the Prime Minister's Literary Awards

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The Prime Minister's Literary Awards were instituted in 2008 by Kevin Rudd. The lucrative prizes survived the recent "tough" federal budget, despite fears that they would be axed in the manner of the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, which were cancelled when Campbell Newman was elected in 2012.

Though the Prime Minister's Awards will continue, the composition of the judging panels, which were recently announced, has raised concerns about fairness and objectivity. The make-up of the non-fiction and history panel has inspired accusations of political bias that could discount a significant number of authors from contention.

We expect that judges of fiction prizes ought to be able to subordinate their preferences for a particular genre or style to the broader concept of literary "merit" or innovation. Yet assessments of excellence in works of non-fiction and history seem harder to disentangle from a judge's political identifications, especially when these have repeatedly been made public.

Black Inc. director Morry Schwartz and publisher Chris Feik have suggested that the chair of the non-fiction and history panel, Gerard Henderson, will likely be incapable of being an impartial judge due to his "incessant and obsessive criticism of leading Australian writers and commentators with whom he disagrees politically".

Henderson is the founder of the Sydney Institute, a current affairs forum, and author of the Media Watch Dog blog. Schwartz and Feik describe Henderson as an "ideological warrior" who has regularly criticised almost two dozen writers, historians and journalists, such as Robert Manne, Paul Bongiorno, Virginia Trioli, Waleed Aly and Elizabeth Farrelly.

Schwartz has proposed that a list of all submitted and shortlisted works should be made publicly available.

The political leanings of judges is important for non-fiction and historical writing, but age is also relevant. Though scholars and writers who have had long careers and published many books are well qualified to adjudicate the merits of other books, approaches to history are constantly evolving.

The average age of the non-fiction and history judging panel is over 75. The eldest, historian Ann Moyal, is 88, and undertook her bachelor degree in the 1940s. The youngest is medical doctor and psychiatrist Ida Lichter at 64.

All of the panel members have had impressive careers and will contribute valuable perspectives to the judging process. Nevertheless, there is a risk that a panel comprised solely of retired academics and writers who have reached retirement age may not be as familiar with, or open to, recent developments and methods in the discipline of history.

When combined with several publishers' concerns about Henderson's alleged political bias, the age demographics of the history and non-fiction panel could also be seen to skew the prize outcome toward conservative perspectives.

The debate about the panel has resurrected the question of the degree to which politics should reasonably influence literary awards. The PM's Awards are unique in that the prize terms specify that the Prime Minister makes the final decision. While the judging panels offer a recommendation for a winner in each category, the Prime Minister can overrule them.

Given this structure, it is unsurprising that the appointments to the non-fiction and history judging panel seem likely to produce winners who will align with Prime Minister Tony Abbott's political worldview.

There is a precedent for claims of political influence in the award of the inaugural Prime Minister's prize for Australian history under the Howard government in 2007. Accounts of the judging process suggest that the panel's choice of Peter Cochrane's *Colonial Ambition* as the clear winner was modified. The award was shared by both Cochrane and Les Carlyon for *The Great War*, which is thought to have been John Howard's preference.

No person can be entirely impartial or an ideological blank slate. However, literary awards that are closely tied to governments bring with them potential for conflicts of interest or accusations of bias.

In the case of the non-fiction and history categories for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, the appointment of a prominent critic of progressive politics as chair of a panel that lacks even one member aged under 60 makes it harder to maintain that these awards can be separated from political ends.

