

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Background to the inquiry

1.1 In May 2006, the Joint Committee on Publications presented its report on the *Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series*.<sup>1</sup> Chapter four of that report considered the issue of providing the Parliamentary Papers Series (PPS) in an electronic/digital format.

1.2 The committee's report made 23 recommendations of which recommendations 12 to 20 went directly to matters of electronic publication and options for developing an electronic PPS. These nine recommendations were broad in scope, covering matters including policy relating to online publishing and monitoring; the availability of documents online; and the possible development of an online digital repository for the PPS. The recommendations included:

- that the Australian National Audit Office regularly monitor the online availability of government documents, especially those presented to Parliament;
- that the Australian Government Information Management Office continue to work with agencies to ensure that all government documents are made available online;
- that the Australian Government Information Management Office take steps to ensure that documents presented to Parliament are permanently available online, including encouraging the use of persistent identifiers to online information;
- that any digital versions of the Parliamentary Papers Series augment the hard copy series;
- that agencies provide a website link, for all documents to be presented to Parliament, to the Tabling Officer of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. This link is to be included in the daily list of documents scheduled for presentation to Parliament, which is circulated to Members and Senators;
- that the chamber departments investigate providing an online list of Parliamentary Papers with hyperlinks to those documents on agency websites; and
- that the Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of the Senate, in consultation with the Australian Government Information Management Office and other stakeholders, investigate and implement the

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1 Joint Committee on Publications (JCP) (2006), *Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series*, Commonwealth of Australia, PP No. 114 of 2006.

development of an online digital repository for the Parliamentary Papers Series.

1.3 The Presiding Officers responded to the committee's recommendations in September 2006 and the government responded in 2006 and 2007. Overall, chapter four's recommendations were supported in principle by both Presiding Officers and the government. However, several administrative and technical issues were noted as impediments to implementing in full all nine recommendations (the responses are at appendix 2).

1.4 These impediments have prevented the development of an electronic PPS to date.

1.5 On 25 May 2009, the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) tabled an audit report into the online availability of government documents tabled in the Parliament.<sup>2</sup> This report indicated that although there had been an increase in the number of tabled documents made available online since 2000, the proportion of the total for each calendar year varied, with peaks and troughs experienced from 2002 onward.<sup>3</sup> According to the ANAO, online availability of tabled documents has 'not exceeded 90 per cent in any year'.<sup>4</sup>

1.6 Furthermore, the ANAO report illustrated a correlation between decreases in online availability of tabled documents and large-scale changes to administrative arrangements, which occur around the time of general elections.<sup>5</sup> This issue and its effect on the long-term availability of some electronic documents is discussed in chapter two.

1.7 Technology and its use by the Australian community has evolved rapidly since 2006. The Commonwealth has been developing a strong web-based presence providing increasing amounts of information and services to the community via the internet. Importantly, the Commonwealth has been formulating policy that is congruent to this overall development, including accessibility requirements, standards and managing expectations relating to government online content. Furthermore, demand for online access to government information and services from the Australian community has steadily increased to a level where the internet is now the preferred way for many citizens to access this information and communicate with government at large.<sup>6</sup>

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2 ANAO, *Online Availability of Government Entities' Documents Tabled in the Australian Parliament*, No. 37/2008-09, Commonwealth of Australia, PP No. 95/2009.

3 op cit, p. 35.

4 ibid.

5 op cit, pp 34-36.

6 AGIMO, *Interacting with Government: Australians' use and satisfaction with e-government services*, Department of Finance and Deregulation, December 2009, pp 1, 4-5.

1.8 Another development has been the release of the Tabled Papers Register within ParInfo Search (the Parliament's main online search resource). The Department of the Senate and the Department of the House of Representatives (chamber departments) jointly administer a database that records information on all documents tabled in the Parliament which is used to produce the *Index to the papers presented to Parliament*. Until recently, this valuable resource was not searchable in electronic form. A recent project undertaken by the parliamentary departments now allows the metadata from the Papers Database to migrate into ParInfo Search, making the information searchable and therefore more accessible.

1.9 With these things in mind the committee considers that a number of matters relating to the provision of an electronic or internet-based PPS that had been examined by the committee in the past now warrant review.

### **Terms of reference**

1.10 On 13 May 2010 the committee adopted the following matters for inquiry and report—To inquire into and report, by 24 June 2010, on the following matters relating to the development of an electronic Parliamentary Papers Series (PPS) with particular reference to:

- (a) the online availability of documents tabled in the Parliament;
- (b) the short and long-term access to documents included in the PPS;
- (c) technological barriers;
- (d) options for a digital repository and electronic distribution; and
- (e) administration of an electronic PPS.

### **Parliamentary Papers Series**

1.11 The Parliamentary Papers Series is a vital mechanism for documenting, disseminating and preserving public information relating to Australia's parliamentary democracy. In its entirety the PPS is a comprehensive collection of information that documents public policy formulation and administration of government since Federation: 'It brings together in one series a wide variety of reports which provide researchers with a consolidated record of many aspects of Australian government'.<sup>7</sup>

1.12 The PPS is a subset of all documents tabled in the Parliament and is made up of those of a substantial nature,<sup>8</sup> including committee reports, annual reports of departments and agencies, reviews on the operation of Acts, significant policy

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7 Department of the Senate, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

8 JCP, *op cit*, p. 2.

statements (white papers), Auditor-General's reports and reports of royal commissions. On average 430 documents are added to the series each year.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The role of the JCP***

1.13 A document becomes a parliamentary paper as a result of a motion being agreed to by either House of Parliament that it 'be printed'<sup>10</sup> or 'made a parliamentary paper'.<sup>11</sup> That is, the document is made a parliamentary paper and included in the series.

1.14 The Joint Committee on Publications is a meeting of the Senate and the House of Representatives publications committees. The publications committees of each house make recommendations to their respective chambers on the printing of documents not previously ordered to be printed by that house. A motion to adopt those recommendations is then usually agreed to by both chambers, resulting in the 'printing' of those documents.

1.15 Overseeing and setting production standards relating to the procurement of Commonwealth publications is another role performed by the committee, with efficient use of taxpayer money being its first principle. The committee has a long history of inquiring into matters related to the PPS. Moreover, the committee has championed the value and significance of this series for many decades and continues to do so.

### ***Distribution***

1.16 Up to this time the PPS has been made available only in print copy and, at present, 51 organisations receive the series.

1.17 Documents are individually numbered and indexed into annual series and distributed (one set each free of charge) to public and university libraries and state legislatures. Some foreign legislatures also subscribe to the series for a small fee to cover postage and handling. The chamber departments hold copies of these documents for parliamentary use and the Parliamentary Library holds a set within its collection. For a comprehensive discussion on the distribution arrangements refer to the committee's 2006 report.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission 10*, p. 2 (Included in this 430 are approximately 12 consolidated volumes of reports from Senate committees that comprise an average of 120 individual reports. Thus the total number of individual documents in the series each year is closer to 550.).

10 Senate standing order 169(1)(b).

11 House of Representatives standing order 202(a).

12 see also Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission 10*, pp 2-3.

1.18 This dissemination of public information seeks to assist an informed citizenry, enabling public discourse and community participation in our democratic institutions and processes.

### ***Administration and cost***

1.19 The PPS is a responsibility of the Parliament and only its elected representatives, with the concurrence of their respective chambers, have the authority to order that a document be included in the series.

1.20 The Presiding Officers administer the PPS and the chamber departments share the responsibilities and costs associated with preparing documents and ensuring that they are provided to recipients efficiently. A distribution agent with the necessary infrastructure to perform large scale distributions performs the manual handling and storage aspects.

1.21 The cost of distributing each year's series can vary depending on the total number of documents ordered to be printed that year and the costs associated with reprinting documents. Not including labour costs, the current average cost of distributing each year's series is \$120,000 pa.<sup>13</sup> However, if the cost of printing the documents borne by author departments and agencies is taken into account, the real cost of producing the series is much higher. The committee also notes that the chamber departments, through their support for the work of parliamentary committees and the hundreds of committee reports tabled every year, are significant contributors of documents in the PPS.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conduct of the inquiry**

1.22 In conducting this inquiry the committee wrote to relevant organisations and stakeholders seeking their comments in relation to the terms of reference. Much of the subject matter has been covered by the committee in the past and with this inquiry the committee was seeking to obtain further or updated comments from key organisations. The short timeframe required to complete the inquiry did not enable the committee to hold a public hearing.

1.23 In total, 56 organisations were contacted, including all recipients of the current PPS distribution and those organisations that gave evidence in relation to the committee's 2006 report, electronic distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series (chapter four).<sup>15</sup>

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13 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission 10*, p. 2.

14 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission 10*, p. 2; Department of the Senate, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

15 JCP, op cit, pp 27-41.

1.24 The committee resolved that evidence from the past inquiry could be used to assist with its deliberations here. Therefore, this report should be considered with the committee's 2006 report which covers these and other matters relating to the distribution of the PPS.

1.25 The terms of reference were published on the committee's web page: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/publ/edpps/tor.htm>.

1.26 The committee received 12 submissions, which are listed at appendix 1 and are published on the committee's web page. Correspondence was also received from four organisations.

### **Acknowledgements**

1.27 The committee thanks the organisations who made submissions, provided correspondence or assistance. Considering the short window of opportunity to do so, their effort is much appreciated.