

Cost recovery and subscriptions to the Parliamentary Papers Series

Background

- 5.1 The issues of cost recovery and a subscription service to the series are closely related. The most obvious way to recover some or all of the costs of the series is by offering paid subscriptions to the series.
- 5.2 The concept of paying for copies of parliamentary papers is not new. In 1964 the Erwin Committee stated that “if a document is public, copies should be readily available to any person at reasonable cost”.¹ Prior to the closure of the Australian Government Printing Service, overseas universities subscribed to the PPS² and until 2003, standing orders for parliamentary papers were available through Government bookshops.³
- 5.3 The 1971 report of the Joint Committee on Publications recommended that the cost of purchasing parliamentary papers be increased to reflect the increased cost of production.⁴
- 5.4 In 1986 the Committee found that parliamentary papers, which are processed and released some time after presentation to Parliament, were less attractive for sale than more immediately available copies of the same

1 Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary and Government Publications, *Report*, Canberra, 1964, p. 20.

2 Joint Committee on Publications, *Future of the Parliamentary Papers Series*, Canberra, 1997, p. 14.

3 Department of the Senate, *Submission 1*, p. 2.

4 Joint Committee on Publications, *Report relating to the distribution and pricing of Parliamentary publications*, Canberra, 1971, p. 10.

documents.⁵ Prior to the closure of the Government Bookshops, twenty five copies of each parliamentary paper were provided for sale.⁶

Cost recovery

- 5.5 The Committee heard that the cost of administering the series by the two Chamber departments was in the order of \$115,000 to \$130,000 per year. This figure is significantly lower than at the time of the 1986 report, when the costs of printing each paper were met by the Chamber departments. Since that time, author agencies have met the cost of production of the 150 copies supplied for the PPS.⁷
- 5.6 The savings achieved by the changes to the series made by the Presiding Officers to take effect from 1 January 2006 would reduce the costs to the Chamber departments by approximately twenty-five percent. Without cost recovery methods, any further reductions in the costs of the series, by restricting eligibility to the series, would be small, due to the underlying administrative costs.⁸
- 5.7 The Committee, earlier in this report, has identified savings to the costs of producing the series without resorting to cost recovery methods. Whilst these savings will not be realised by the Chamber departments, they will nevertheless reduce the burden on the government as a whole.

Recoverable costs

Administrative costs

- 5.8 The Chamber departments stated that any cost recovery for the series would only cover the administrative costs they incurred.⁹ These costs, if recovered, should be shared equally between the Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of the Senate.

5 Joint Committee on Publications, *Review of the cost and distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series*, Canberra 1986, p. 23.

6 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission 16*, p. 14.

7 Joint Committee on Publications, *Review of the Cost and Distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series*, Canberra, 1986, p. 12; Ms Robyn McClelland, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 10.

8 Rosa Ferranda, Department of the Senate, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 4.

9 Department of the Senate, *Submission 1*, p. 3; Ms Robyn McClelland, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 10.

- 5.9 Author agencies also incur a cost in providing copies of their documents for series. These documents are printed as a statutory requirement for presentation to Parliament, and the copies for the PPS are typically run-on copies (with the exception of the untrimmed copies). The cost of producing these parliamentary paper copies, while still an additional cost, is less than if a separate print run was required.
- 5.10 The Committee considered the view that Parliament should not pass on the costs of the series for which it is funded. As most of the recipients of the series are publicly funded, the costs of the series would be shifted from one arm of government to another, which is not an efficient use of public funds.¹⁰
- 5.11 The Chamber Departments were divided on their obligations towards the PPS. The Department of the House of Representatives questioned the role of the Parliament in disseminating the reports of the executive, while Senate viewed the series as fulfilling an obligation of the Parliament to inform the public.¹¹
- 5.12 The Committee is of the view that, as the Parliament selects the reports of the executive (and of the Parliament) that it sees as significant enough to warrant inclusion in the Parliamentary Papers Series, it should remain the responsibility of the Parliament to ensure its distribution as long as that collection of significant documents continues in existence.
- 5.13 All documents presented to Parliament are, or at least should be, already available to the public through the publications.gov.au website or individual agencies. The PPS, as a subset of the substantial documents of government and the Parliament, is a value-added product when processing, numbering, labelling and despatch are taken into account. At least a portion of these costs should be able to be recovered by the Chamber Departments, which would reflect the value of the series.

Printing costs

- 5.14 There is no proposal before the Committee to recover the printing costs of agencies in providing copies of documents for the PPS, although the Department of the Senate feared that this may occur should the Chamber Departments move towards cost recovery.¹² The administrative cost of

10 Department of Parliamentary Services (Victoria), *Submission 9*, p. 3; Ms Pamela Gatenby, National Library of Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 31 October 2005, p. 11.

11 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission 16*, pp. 6-7; Department of the Senate, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

12 Department of the Senate, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

distributing any monies raised to agencies would likely be greater than the actual costs recovered.

Full or partial cost recovery

- 5.15 The Clerk of the House of Representatives recommended trialling a subscription service on a partial cost recovery basis, although full cost recovery for the series would also be feasible.¹³
- 5.16 The Committee has earlier recommended that certain organisations continue to receive copies of the PPS free of charge. It therefore opposes full cost recovery through a user pays system.

Recommendation 21

- 5.17 **The Committee recommends that any cost recovery measures are only applied to partially recover the administrative costs of the Chamber Departments.**

Subscriptions to the PPS

- 5.18 The committee received several submissions expressing firm resistance to any subscription service for the Parliamentary Papers Series. Libraries, whose resources are limited, would be placed under great pressure to continue to provide the same level of services if forced to pay for the series. This would detrimentally affect public access to the series.¹⁴
- 5.19 The Parliamentary Library of Western Australia stated that subscriptions for the series would jeopardise reciprocal arrangements between State and Commonwealth libraries.¹⁵
- 5.20 The Committee takes the view, consistent with that of the Australian Library and Information Association, that libraries or others, who make

13 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission 16*, p. 11; Mr Ian Harris, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 9.

14 Australian Government Libraries Information Network, *Submission 4*, p. 8; Parliamentary Library of Western Australia, *Submission 12*, p. 2; Council of Australian State Libraries, *Submission 5*, p. 2.

15 Parliamentary Library of Western Australia, *Submission 12*, p. 2.

the papers publicly available, should not be required to subscribe to the PPS.¹⁶

- 5.21 Similarly, Government departmental libraries serve the public by providing a better service to government, and the Committee has already stated that cost shifting from one agency to another is not appropriate.

Demand for subscriptions

- 5.22 The Department of the Senate indicated that there is scope for a limited number of subscriptions to be offered from the 15 spare sets of documents provided for the series.¹⁷ However, if demand for subscriptions increases beyond this capacity, the stock required to be supplied by agencies would need to be increased.

- 5.23 It is not certain whether or not a market exists for a subscription service. Some agencies, such as the National Archives of Australia, have indicated that they would be prepared to pay a subscription if it was the only means to continue receiving the series, while the Australian National Audit Office stated that the feasibility of a subscription service would hinge on the cost and the nature of the product offered.¹⁸

- 5.24 The Department of the House of Representatives suggested surveying recipients to determine whether they would be prepared to subscribe to the PPS. They conceded, however, that in all likelihood recipients would respond that they would prefer to receive the series free of charge. Other issues affecting demand for a subscription are libraries receiving stock through the Library Deposit and Free Issue Schemes and accessibility via the Internet.¹⁹

- 5.25 The Committee heard that organisations most likely to subscribe to the series are those that have been recently removed from the eligibility guidelines. These include foreign embassies, municipal libraries and political parties, as well as those libraries that desire additional copies of the series.²⁰

16 Australian Library and Information Association, *Submission 6*, p. 8.

17 Department of the Senate, *Submission 1*, p. 3; Mr Harry Evans, Department of the Senate, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 7.

18 National Archives of Australia, *Submission 10*, p. 3; State Library of New South Wales, *Submission 3*, p. 3; Australian National Audit Office, *Submission 15*, p. 2.

19 Ms Robyn McClelland, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 10.

20 Ms Rosa Ferranda, Department of the Senate, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 6; Mr Ian Harris, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 10.

Recommendation 22

- 5.26 **The Committee recommends that all recipients of the series be offered additional copies of the series by subscription, in either pamphlet or blister pack. Organisations that previously received the series should be offered an opportunity to subscribe to the series.**
- 5.27 Without the establishment of an online repository for the PPS, or an alternative supply mechanism for distribution of digital copies, subscriptions should be limited to hard copies only.
- 5.28 The State Library of Victoria suggested that subscriptions be offered for blister packs but the electronic version of the series and loose pamphlet copies remain free.²¹ This is consistent with the approach taken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which provides basic information for free, but places a fee on more detailed information.²²
- 5.29 The Parliamentary Library of Western Australia indicated that to pay a subscription on top of the significant binding costs, estimated by the Department of the Senate at around \$2000, would be prohibitive.²³
- 5.30 The Committee is committed to providing the series free of charge to eligible recipients. It also accepts the limit of one free copy imposed by the Presiding Officers in their recent changes to the eligibility guidelines (see Recommendation 6).
- 5.31 Whether an eligible organisation receives a pamphlet copy or blister pack, it should not be required to pay for it. However, a subscription charge should apply to any subsequent copies of the series supplied to those eligible recipients.
- 5.32 Organisations that fall outside the eligibility guidelines should be also able to subscribe to the series.

21 State Library of Victoria, *Submission 2*, p. 3.

22 Department of Education, Science and Training, *Submission 17*, p. 1.

23 Parliamentary Library of Western Australia, *Submission 12*, p. 2; Department of the Senate, *Submission 1A*, p. 1.

The cost of a subscription

- 5.33 The Department of the House of Representatives told the Committee that a subscription charge of \$2600 paid by 50 subscribers would fully recover the \$130,000 administrative cost of the Chamber Departments. A subscription at even half this price, the Committee heard, would probably be too expensive for most libraries.²⁴
- 5.34 As an indicator to the sort of pricing set for other similar subscriptions services, the Bills subscription service, administered by the Chamber Departments sets the costs at \$752 per annum.²⁵ The Committee considers that this figure would not be an unreasonable cost for subscribers to the PPS to bear. At an average of roughly 430 documents per year, this equates to less than \$1.75 per document.
- 5.35 The Committee is comfortable with the Chamber Departments setting the price for a subscription to the series, but will require annual reports detailing the cost of a subscription and the organisations subscribing.

Recommendation 23

- 5.36 **The Committee recommends that the Chamber Departments set the price for a subscription to the Parliamentary Papers Series, and annually report to the Committee:**
- **The cost of a subscription to the series; and**
 - **The organisations subscribing to the series.**

Mrs Trish Draper MP

Committee Chair

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24 Ms Robyn McClelland, Department of the House of Representatives, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 10.

25 Ms Rosa Ferranda, Department of the Senate, *Transcript of evidence*, 7 November 2005, p. 5.