



Submission 09

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DEPARTMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Publications
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Re: Inquiry into the distribution of the Parliamentary Papers series

Dear Committee Members

Thankyou for the opportunity to provide a response to the recently announced inquiry into the distribution of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers series.

We wish to endorse the position taken on these issues in the communication from the executive director by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Jennefer Nicholson. The absolute minimal position we would advocate is that the Committee neither do anything nor approve of anything that would have the effect of reducing the current level and standard of access to the Parliamentary Papers series, thereby upholding the position the Committee has consistently maintained until now.

For reasons which are developed below we would invite the Committee to reverse or delay these proposals for the time being at least until a comprehensive, certain and effective system of providing government information across the whole of the federal government has been developed and demonstrated to be in effective operation. Given the complexity of the current situation and the reasonable likelihood that Australia may very soon be able to offer a comprehensive system it is not only premature but damaging for the Committee to accede to these proposals.

We would further recommend that it utilise this inquiry as a significant opportunity to consider the basis on which a vastly improved service could be provided. The broad concept of making government information accessible to Australians in an efficient,

thoroughgoing and consistent way according to the best technology then available was presented by the present Committee's predecessor the Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary and Government Publications under its chairman G. D. Erwin, MHR in its groundbreaking and comprehensive report of 5 May 1964 which made recommendations on all aspects of the situation (Australian parliamentary papers, 1964/1966, v. 9, p. 35-116/ no. 32). In light of the rapidly changing technological environment we believe the time has come for this Committee to consider embarking on a similar inquiry.

Furthermore we would advise the Committee to give consideration to extending its brief permanently to cover the issue of access to Australian federal government information generally. This should include the extent to which standards, principles, guidelines, policies and strategies are being effectively and consistently applied. There are clear discrepancies in current practices which we believe would benefit from the formulation of a national policy for the creation of a comprehensive, certain and effective system of providing government information. Such a concept on being sufficiently developed has the potential to provide the basis for legislation and a model for all Australian jurisdictions to follow (state, territory and municipal).

We would also recommend that the Committee seek the expert advice of Roxanne Missingham, the newly appointed Parliamentary Librarian, who is extraordinarily well placed to inform it about current developments and issues.

Responses to the individual terms of reference of the inquiry follow.

1. The potential impact of changes to the distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series PPS made by the Presiding Officers, namely the tightening of eligibility guidelines and the cessation of blister packs to commence on 1 January 2006

We recommend that the Parliament of Australia should reverse the decision to cease providing the blister pack arrangements for Australian parliamentary papers from January 2006 for the simple reason that the immediate result will be that the major Australian libraries will by that fact no longer hold reliably complete sets or sets even reliably comparable with one another. The proposal has the effect of undermining the basic concept behind the parliamentary paper series of a system of providing to the public permanently reliable access to the attested records of fundamental government information unaffected by the passage of time.

If this proposal is approved by the Committee, the Parliament will effectively be requiring individual Australian libraries to take on the role of validating the authenticity and completeness of their holdings series, a role which only the Parliament and its officers are authorised to perform. By so doing it is creating long-term uncertainties about the completeness and reliability of the sets they hold, and undermining the intent of the Parliamentary Papers Act, no.16 of 1908 (Cth) as amended. We would also note the enormous inefficiency of requiring individual libraries to take on this role when a centralised system such as blister pack distribution is so clearly more effective.

This proposal cannot be seen as other than a short sighted attempt by parliamentary officials to constrain their undoubted costs without apparent regard for the general

situation in which Parliament is in fact operating. Even when a comprehensive and effective system of delivering digital electronic versions of the parliamentary paper series becomes available there will always be a requirement at least for the National and state libraries to provide access to a reliable hard-copy version of the series, and such a requirement may well continue to extend to many of the university libraries, state and territory parliamentary libraries and possibly certain major public libraries catering for centres far from Australia's capital cities.

2. The provision of the PPS in a digital format, either as an alternative or an adjunct to the hard copy series

We would welcome any extension of the provision of the parliamentary papers series in a digital format, but only as an adjunct rather than an alternative to the hard copy series.

Most of the infrastructure, capacity and delivery elements to provide what could be a world-class and world-first comprehensive, certain and effective system of providing government information in digital electronic format across the whole of the federal government is already available in the Australian parliament, executive departments and agencies and especially the National Library of Australia. As we understand it the National Library and the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) are engaged in serious discussions about how such a system could be provided in the not too distant future. Any system will need to address such issues as document, format, website and delivery standards, the creation, provision, preservation of digital government publications, access principles, a comprehensive statement of types of content to be made accessible, principles of access equity, technological upgrades, preservation of digital publications and making pre-digital publications.

There are good grounds for believing that an effective service could be provided on an appropriate contractual/ service agreement basis without incurring great expense, the benefits and features of which we believe should be considered by the Committee in another inquiry, or by an extension of this inquiry. In this context, we would advise the Committee to give consideration to how providing the Parliamentary Paper series in digital format could best operate as part of this wider delivery system, and to avoid reaching premature conclusions that the Committee may find itself being obliged to alter soon afterwards.

3 and 4. The feasibility of a subscription service, either in digital or hard copy form [and] The possibility of partial or full cost recovery for the series

We believe the suggestion of subscription arrangements on a partial or full cost recovery basis to be entirely retrograde. These proposals should be firmly resisted as placing a charge on the public or on institutions created to serve the needs of the public generally for access to fundamental categories of government information which is their right and on which no charge should justly be applied. We also believe it to be unreasonable for the parliamentary departments to meet public access expenses they are obliged to incur from their ordinary running costs and believe there is a case for Parliament to meet these needs by special appropriations.

The case for this is further strengthened by the recent budgetary decision for 2005/2006 operating from 1 July 2005 whereby the Australian Bureau of Statistics is now making all its digital electronic publications available to the public free. It is not hard to conclude that there is a widening discrepancy between the policy of the Executive with regard to subsidising public access to government information and the proposals by the Legislature to effectively restrict public access to its information.

Yours Sincerely



Tim Brown
Government Information Librarian



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