

SUBMISSION
TO: Parliament of Australia Joint Committee Inquiry
into the effects of the ongoing efficiency dividend
on smaller public sector agencies

I have been a regular user of the National Library of Australia for 13 years and am a Petherick Room researcher. In that time I have written one book, four monographs, three book chapters, eight papers and given a number of conference papers. This would not have been possible without the resources and services provided by the National Library, and I cannot speak highly enough of the efficient and dedicated service the staff of the National Library has provided in that time.

In that period I have also seen the National Library undergo significant changes. Of these, the establishment of electronically based information services and the transition to an electronic holdings-retrieval system have probably been the most dramatic. There has effectively been a quantum leap in access to information and the reader's ability to find items in the catalogue and order them with alacrity.

Within its brief the National Library attempts to meet the research and information needs of many people from different walks of life, ranging from those searching out the history of their family, students doing assignments and researchers engaging in highly significant research. But it also endeavours to make Australians aware of their heritage, as embodied in the incredible array of material it has accumulated since its inception, reflecting the many facets of Australian life from the past that give meaning to our present.

Being a national institution the National Library also has a responsibility to make itself accessible and relevant, and engage with the wider community and people of Australia. In so doing it must attempt to satisfy a diversity of intellectual and cultural interests. It has been quite successful in doing this, spectacularly so at times, with numerous landmark exhibitions such as the Treasures Exhibition and National Treasures Exhibition. In essence the National Library is more than just an institution that collects books and the like, it has a very, very important role in defining our national culture.

As an interested observer I have seen first-hand the results of the National Library's efforts to meet its commitments in accordance with the efficiency dividend. The efficiency dividend appears to have stimulated new ways of thinking and doing in the National Library, with the main benefit being an acceleration in the adoption of electronic information and retrieval services. But there are limits. I find it difficult to conceive how the Library can meet its service obligations any more efficiently than it does at the moment. With year by year pressure to cut costs I have noted a slow attrition of services to library users, the hours collections are accessible have been reduced, the hours when one can actually order material have been reduced, the number of staff available to assist library users have been reduced. As I also hold down a job these changes have had a direct impact on me. The Library management

has introduced these changes with a view to minimising negative impacts, but clearly core functions of the National Library are slowly being compromised.

While I appreciate that there is an obligation on government to ensure public funds are used wisely and efficiently, I ask, what is the price of Australian culture? Culture is an intangible thing but if we think it has some value and wish it to flourish, the current trend in funding must be reversed and additional resources provided to recover lost ground. In an economic sense this is necessary if we wish to use our cultural capital efficiently. Perhaps more importantly it provides an opportunity to express through this iconic vehicle what is unique about Australia, so that we can do it in a way we can justifiably be proud of.

Your sincerely

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