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**Speech by Senator John Watson - The Role of the Publications
Committee**

**ALIA Seminar “Digital Amnesia – Challenges of Government
Online”**

Good afternoon,

Thank you for the opportunity of presenting to your timely and well balanced programme. I would first like to speak about some of the unusual features of the Committee system that impacts on publications.

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate appoint their own, separate Publications Committees. However they usually meet together to form the Joint Publications Committee. Each Committee can meet independently if required.

The Publications Committee has had a long history existing in its current form for 34 years, replacing the Printing Committee in 1970.

The recommendations of the Erwin Committee ranged from a call to “establish a central government publishing office, to a recommendation concerning “a continuing parliamentary review” by a Joint Committee with power “...to review the publications of

Parliament and departments, their printing, publication and distribution”.

Even though the Joint Publications Committee has outlasted the AGPS, it retains the power to inquire into, and report on, the printing, publication and distribution of parliamentary and government publications.

The major focus of the Committee is reviewing documents for publication but I believe we should take the opportunity to liaise with our clients principally the National Library, your organisation and Archives. This was the modus operandi when I chaired the Senate Select Committee on Superannuation for many years.

The two Houses invariably accept the recommendations of the Committee in relation to documents for publication

As many of you are no doubt aware, the Parliamentary Papers Series dates back to 1901 and is a significant record of the activities of Parliament and the government of the day and as such forms part of our documentary heritage and social and intellectual capital of Australia. As an indexed and numbered series it is a valuable and unique resource not only for current users but for researchers and historians. Papers selected for the series are widely distributed and made available to the public indirectly via municipal, State and university libraries, among others.

About half of the documents presented to Parliament are included in the Parliamentary Papers Series. Reports of Parliamentary Committee inquiries, Government policy or white papers, Government agency and departmental annual reports and documents tabled because of statutory requirements make up the bulk of the series. Guidelines for the selection of documents have been in place and followed by the Committee since 1977.

In its 1989 report, the Committee recommended that the Parliamentary Papers Series continue. The Committee stated that any replacement of the series should fulfil the requirements set out by the Erwin report, of access by those who require it, and the permanent preservation of the collection in a convenient and accessible form.

The traditional format for the Parliamentary Papers Series is the paper document, printed in B5. The Acts Interpretation Act defines a document as “any article or material from which sounds, images or writings are capable of being reproduced”, which obviously includes more than just paper. Video tapes have been presented to Parliament and it is theoretically possible, although unlikely, that a non-paper document could be made a part of the Parliamentary Papers Series. A ‘paperless office’ is one thing, but I suspect that a ‘paperless Parliamentary Papers Series’ will be a long time coming. Although, in the future, the series could be distributed, in its entirety, in electronic form, say on a CD-ROM. Investigating such an option would fall within the Committee’s scope for inquiry.

While the Publications Committee mainly concerns itself with the Parliamentary Papers Series, it does have a role in monitoring access and the distribution of the 400 hundred or so papers that are presented to Parliament but don't make it into the series. Again, agencies are responsible for the distribution of these papers, through both the Legal and the Library Deposits Schemes and on their own websites. However, it is not possible to guarantee that all printed publications are lodged by departments and agencies and if the Publications.gov.au website is to be a success, agencies must continue to make the effort to make their information available. It isn't good enough simply to say 'it's on our website'. Some thought needs to be given as to how best to reach their audiences and how those audiences with try to find that information.

As I've mentioned previously, the Publications Committee is empowered to look at aspects of publication and distribution. The Committee is currently interested in the availability of government publications in both printed and hard copy formats. No formal inquiry underway at the moment, but the committee is paying particular attention to the impacts of technology on the preferred method of access to government publications and the use of standards such as metadata and the distribution and preservation of printed and electronic publications.

Departments and agencies are responsible for distribution of publications, both printed and electronic. The Australian Government

Bookshop Network (Bookshops) was a distribution mechanism previously available to agencies, but it was not widely used by either agencies as a distribution mechanism or citizens to purchase Australian Government publications. Departments and agencies often produce small print runs of hardcopy publications and often, once print run is exhausted, the publication is no longer readily available in printed form. In these conditions, often agencies have considered it more cost effective to give away printed publications rather than sell them.

This environment, among other things, led to the closure of the bookshop, with the small number of departments and agencies using the Network finding alternative distribution mechanisms. Its closure appears to have had very minimal impact on the Australian public. It may be that the public now prefer to access government information electronically. What needs to be established is the actual demand for this information and whether what is available meets the needs of those seeking it. A challenge for these agencies will be to ensure that those without access to the Internet don't fall through the cracks and are still able get their hands on any and all information that they require.

Access for special interest groups, such as the vision impaired must be ensured if all Australians are to have the opportunity to inform themselves of government and Parliamentary activities and actively participate in our democracy. As an example, computer software which converts electronic text to speech via voice synthesiser is

available and may be a more cost effective alternative to talking books or printing in braille.

The launch today of the Publications.gov.au website will go a long way to ensuring access to government and Parliamentary information. However, the value of the system is in the participation of government agencies. As with the Parliamentary Papers Series, if no documents are supplied, the series is worthless. Prior to the last election, the Committee received briefings on the new publications website. Committee members were anxious that appropriate standards for metadata were codified and enforced. It is no good having a document available somewhere in cyberspace if the people who want it can't find it. Again the onus is on agencies to comply with these requirements, and all indications lead us to believe that they are.

The National Archives of Australia administers the Australian Government Locator Service or AGLS standard that specifies how to describe electronic publications using metadata which is data about data. There is no mandate that departments and agencies use AGLS to describe electronic publications. A subset of AGLS Metadata may be used by agencies to register publications with the National Library of Australia Kinetica search service.

Effectiveness of metadata as mechanism to enhance discovery of publications on the internet and its level of use by agencies may need some investigation to ensure that Internet publications are easily

found and available to all. Widespread use by agencies of the publications.gov.au website will be encouraged by the Committee and should become the first port of call for Internet users of government and parliamentary information.

Online Information Service Obligations, a part of the Government's Online Strategy states that government agencies must ensure that current publications are available via the Internet. But what about preserving public access to historical and previous versions of electronic publications? We currently have challenges of broken links, sometimes referred to colloquially as "link rot", for example changes to website addresses for electronic publications can result in difficulties finding or returning to a Government publication on the internet. The same sorts of issues can be due to the restructuring of the website. Generally speaking IT professionals have little feeling for the culture of archiving. Greater or more effective use of metadata may assist in resolving such matters.

In broad terms, the National Library of Australia is responsible for preserving publications available to the public. It operates the Pandora and Kinetica web initiatives that preserve electronic publications. But to what extent are individual agencies and the government as a whole responsible for ensuring that their publications remain accessible? With paper-based documents, the life of the paper itself regulates how long it can be accessed for. This becomes more complicated with electronic documents, where changes in file formats and web addresses need to be factored in.

There is also discussion about what constitutes a publication. Senator Abetz gave a very comprehensive definition. However, there still remain issues for example, is a publication anything published on the internet, including websites, PDF or Word documents?

Also, there interesting issues associated with copyright that prevent the National Library of Australia from automatically downloading content from the internet for preservation. Underpinning this is a view that the National Library of Australia must seek permission from individual agencies to fulfil this function.

Again, the Committee may have a role, in conjunction with other stakeholders, in setting standards for preservation and archiving for government agencies to follow.

The systems are in place to help government agencies to meet their obligations in the distribution of documents to the public. The Publications Committee is keen to make sure that government and parliamentary information remains accessible to the public for the long term, in whatever form that information is available. The Committee will keep an eye on developments in the arena of electronic copies and the issues surrounding access and preservation of these documents.