

SUBMISSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION ON PARALLEL IMPORTATION OF BOOKS

I am an Australian author. I was a member of the initial Literature Board of the Australia Council (1973-6; Deputy Chair 1974-6) and Director of the Literature Board 1983-90. I was Executive Director of the National Book Council 1992-97 and initial Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide 1997-2005. I have published over 50 books, including in England, Hungary, Romania and Macedonia as well as in Australia.

The regulations existing on parallel importation of Australian books do mean that Australian authors can sell their copyright in different markets. This is not only of benefit to authors, it can be of benefit to the Australian Tax Department (unless specific agreement to waive Australian tax has been made).

Authors live by licencing their copyright, so any move to restrict their negotiability in this must be viewed with alarm by authors.

Australia is a small market, and this must be understood by all parties concerned.

Dumping of remaindered book published overseas already exists here. Authors receive no royalties from sale of such books. Big publishers will have calculated profitability from their home market; therefore sales in Australia for them will be a bonus, even remaindered sales. I cannot see Australian authors have anything to benefit from such a move.

It has already been demonstrated that editions of Australian books printed overseas (e.g. Elizabeth Jolley, Tim Winton) especially in the United States of America, have been modified for non-Australian expressions. If

Australian authors were forced overseas (and the diminution of Australian publishing presupposes that) there would be a further loss of Australian 'flavour'. Globalisation should not mean Imperialism.

My experience with the Literature saw a complete revitalisation not only of Australian authorship (in 1972/3 only 9 Australian 'literary' novels were published – see my *THE LITERATURE BOARD; A BRIEF HISTORY*, 1988 – but over the next decade even newspapers could refer to the 'renaissance in Australian writing'. This was due to the Board's introduction of extended grants to Australian writers, but also to the system of grants to publishers of Australian titles (as against the former Commonwealth Literary Fund's system of guarantees against loss, which were an incentive for publishers to show a loss).

The Literature Board no longer gives a subsidy of any substantial value, neither does it support individual writers to the same extent it once did. This means that the whole concept of subsidy is problematic, and will give rise, undoubtedly, to controversy and possible mismanagement. State subsidies are, at best, meagre and even more politically motivated. Increased subsidy is not the answer.

Publishing of books by Australian authors in Australia would seem an undoubted virtue, both from a cultural and an international perspective. It seems we suffer the disadvantage of using English as a language. Even French-Canadians have their own publishing industry.

It seems ridiculous to kill-off the Australian publishing industry for the supposed benefit to 'consumers'. Australian books will always be higher priced because, as I have said, of our small and geographically spread, population. Overseas publishers make use of this, not only for dumping

If books, but in pricing of their product. A \$1 or \$2 difference, as has been proved, makes little difference to the buying public. English or American publishers will undoubtedly mark up their product here accordingly.

What chance do Australian authors have of being published overseas? Better than earlier, perhaps, due to the enlightened support of previous systems of subsidy; nevertheless one of the obvious literary changes has been the increase in the number of first novels published here. That has not come about by accident or by a more enlightened readership.

Bookstores these days give Australian books greater space than they once did, but I think a less apologetic attitude to things Australian has also played a part. Have we at last got over our cultural cringe?

The Issues Paper of the Productivity Commission would seem to indicate the cultural cringe is still with us.

In an earlier life I was a qualified Public Accountant. The Issue Paper does not convince me that the real financial issues have been adequately targetted. Use of the internet is still open to question, both for sales of books and for downloading of books. Current overseas optimism should be taken with a grain of salt. The physical book remains an item of truly advanced technology, portable, not requiring a screen, electricity or plugs. It has moved beyond the scroll. Pages can be marked, annotated or turned at will and, better still, they are easier to refer to. The book will be with us for a long time.

If price to the buyer is the ultimate issue, then the Commission should be properly cynical about overseas interests.

If cultural values are the issue (And I think undoubtedly they are) then Australian authors have much to lose if copyright restrictions are eased. Australian publishers, also, have much to fear from yet another takeover of our distinctive culture.

The Australian buying public would be the loser, as has already been demonstrated by the loss of proper restrictions in the CD and television markets. Is Australian literary publishing also headed for the scrap-heap. Productivity is in the eye of the beholder.

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