

## MAGABALA BOOKS ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

### *Indigenous Australian Publishing*

---

The Commissioners  
Mike Woods (presiding)  
Louise Sylvan  
Productivity Commission

Re: PARALLEL IMPORTATION OF BOOKS STUDY

Dear Commissioners

I write on behalf of Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation to encourage the Commission to make a recommendation to retain current restrictions on parallel importation of books into Australia. The abolishment of these restrictions would severely threaten the ability of small publishers like Magabala Books to support and develop Australian literature.

Surrendering our territorial copyright will result in an avalanche of cheap imports flooding the local market. Larger publishers will be forced to become mere distributors of UK and US titles rather than investing in the career of Australian authors, and small publishers like Magabala will be unable to compete with rising costs and decreasing sales. Diluting the impact of unique Australian publishing on our cultural identity in this way presages a barren cultural landscape indeed.

However, it is not only authors and publishers that will bear the hardship of an 'open market'. Our entire independent retail book industry will also be at stake. Many of the smaller, independent booksellers are the mainstay of niche publishing. Their demise due to open competition with the bigger end of the market will have a significant impact on sales of Australian titles and therefore on Australian authors and publishers.

#### *The Magabala perspective*

Magabala Books is a not-for-profit organisation that operates as an independent Australian publisher and has long been recognised as a producer of quality Australian literature with many titles receiving accolades in prestigious national awards. Magabala exists to record, publish and promote Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander culture and to assist Indigenous Australians to tell their stories, encouraging their professional and economic development in the process.

Over the past two decades Magabala has produced a solid list of more than one hundred titles hailing from throughout Australia and ranging from autobiography and social history, to children's picture books, fiction, traditional stories and poetry. Authors and artists such as Glenyse Ward, Bruce Pascoe, Pat Torres, Jimmy Pike, Dennis Nona, Bill Neidjie, Philip McLaren and Alf Taylor all form part of the Magabala Books' stable. In addition, Magabala has supported and nurtured several young, emerging Indigenous authors and illustrators, one as young as five years old!

Based in Broome, in the far north of Western Australia, Magabala Books is perhaps the most isolated publishing house in the world. The decision to establish a publishing house in a remote pearling town reflected the local Aboriginal community view that recognised the importance of their own people taking control of their stories and art - and a desire to share them with a nation largely ignorant of the history and culture of its Indigenous people.

Employing 6 full-time staff, 3 part-time, as well as consultants, designers, typesetters, editors and other contractors, Magabala is managed by a fully Indigenous Board of Directors. We produce 6 - 10 new titles per year and also rely heavily on backlist sales through our national distributors. Distribution is an on-going issue and we are constantly working with our distributors to achieve the best possible sales of our titles. Should we be forced to compete in a 'surrendered market' Magabala would cease to exist as distributors could not afford to take on small, niche publishers such as ours.

The potential removal of the current parallel importation restrictions poses a serious threat to Magabala Books as a publishing house as well as to the many Indigenous creators that benefit from the work of Magabala in promoting Indigenous literature, not to mention the wider Indigenous community whose culture is better understood and celebrated.

#### *Access to an Australian Publisher*

For many of our creators, Magabala Books has provided a means for getting their story told - in many cases, a process of healing and reconciliation. It may be that these creators will never publish again. For others, Magabala Books has launched an on-going career in writing or book illustration, providing economic returns and social outcomes for a community that is largely marginalised in our society. Magabala Books plays a crucial role in facilitating the nurturing and development of Indigenous creators, who in turn, contribute to the social and cultural identity of our nation.

Access to a publisher like Magabala Books has been critical in developing a body of Indigenous Australian literature that is reflective of the nation's history and contemporary culture.

#### *Cultural Benefits*

Social and cultural benefits often cannot be measured in terms of economic returns. It is the intrinsic value of such benefits that ensure the health and well-being of our society. There is now significant evidence that participation and engagement in arts and culture results in better learning outcomes for our children. The provision of appropriate and relevant material that reflects Australian culture is vitally important in this area.

Indigenous communities are reported to have the lowest literacy levels in Australia. It is agreed that increasing literacy in Indigenous families enables communities to be able to identify solutions for dealing with family violence and to promote social and cultural respect across the community.

From 2005-2007, in partnership with the Broome and state libraries in WA, Magabala Books produced a series of Babies Board Books. This project aimed to break the inter-generational cycle of illiteracy by focusing on parents together with their children and improving the life chances of Indigenous children through increased literacy providing opportunities for participation in mainstream economy and higher income levels. Research showed that most of the board books on the Australian market originate from overseas and the few Australian board books available do not reflect the diverse cultures of our communities. It is therefore difficult to encourage Indigenous parents to read and inspire their families to do so when the available resources are so far removed from their own life experiences. This project addressed this gap.

Projects such as these, often undertaken by smaller, independent organisations like Magabala, have far-reaching effects on the development of our social fabric – effects that can't always immediately be measured in financial terms.

### *Existing arts funding*

It is unrealistic to expect existing arts funding sources to address the outcomes of removing the importation restrictions. It is also unrealistic to expect increased funding for the arts and culture in the current economic climate. Arts funding is already under pressure and it is unlikely, in the short-term, that any significant increases can be expected. To expect existing funding structures to fill the gaps that will result from parallel importation of books is in effect, diminishing the value of both the arts and the publishing industries in this country.

### *Future Market Developments*

Like our film industry, the Australian book industry is growing and developing. The wealth of creative talent demonstrated by our authors and illustrators cannot be ignored, and the development of more Australian publishing activity has provided avenues for the realisation of those talents.

Employment, training, education and personal development are all outcomes from our publishing operations in a small remote town that is experiencing the effects of the current economic downturn. Decreased sales income would make it difficult for Magabala to retain existing staff and to continue to develop and nurture existing and new creators.

### *Reforms*

In order to sustain a healthy, creative and growing industry, it is important to ensure that any reforms accurately reflect the needs of ALL sectors of the industry. Instead of proposing the lifting of restrictions that will result in hardship to the very people who create our Australian identity, let us work together to address issues such as;

- The effects and regulation of online technologies for the retail sector
- Price parity
- Supply and Demand strategies

### *Conclusion*

As a small, independent publisher based in a remote location, Magabala's existence would be severely threatened by the removal of the current restrictions on parallel importation of books into Australia. Such reforms would not result in cheaper products and increased literacy, but would instead undermine the ability of the industry to bring to the world audience the stories and creative talents of Australian authors, artists and illustrators, many of whom would not be published without the support of Australian publishers. We simply could not compete with the avalanche of cut-price product that would appear on the Australian market, effectively cauterising the Australian publishing industry.

Yours sincerely

Suzie Haslehurst  
Chief Executive Officer

20 January 2009