

Parallel Importation of Books Study
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

3 April 2009

Dear Members of the Commission,

I write as a mother, teacher and author, to voice my concern with the proposed changes to Parallel Importation Regulations affecting all aspects of the Australian publishing industry.

As a mother raising two boys on a grazing property in rural Australia from 1998, I was soon heartily sick of picture book farms with one sheep, one horse, one pig, one duck, one dog, one cat, one sheep, one rabbit... and one black and white dairy cow! These books reflected English farms that had no similarity to life on an Australian grazing property.

Trying to find a picture book that reflected the Australian farming way of life was a frustrating process that eventually set me on the path to publication. It has also shaped many of the books I have written in my new role as an Australian children's author.

As a rural mum, I believe we need to nurture our publishing industry so that Australia maintains its new voice in children's literature. Bring on the Australian lifestyle stories and let our Aussie kids read books that they can relate to! Don't let's go back to the bad ol' days with more English farms.

As a teacher and Prep to Yr 10 **Literacy Co-ordinator**, I am all too aware of the need to make things relevant to students. Recent years have seen a sudden surge in the availability of quality Australian literature for schools. A growing number of books reflect our Australian lifestyle; beautiful books that appeal to both students and educators. This increase has been evident in both the Educational stream and the Trade stream and has prompted a change in student attitude toward reading materials.

'Are we there yet?' by Alison Lester is a classic example of a Trade Australian picture book brimming with practical classroom applications. You can easily get a term's work built around this book - and still not tap its depths. This book oozes Aussie humour, perceptions and experiences and could only have been written by an Australian. Every time I read it I'm struck by the feeling that it could have been MY story. Not because I think I'm that good, but because Alison has made it so Aussie real and personal...

The Australian government recognises the importance of literacy, and has identified it as a focus area for all Australian schools. Yet that same government is seeking to undermine the publishing industry that equips our school with reading resources to further the literacy standards of our students.

Aside from the literacy focus, there is also a greater Federal push to teach Australian history in our schools. Julia Gillard was quoted in the Age (January 2009) as saying:

"Australian history is a critical part of the curriculum and should be included in all years of schooling, not just for a few years in secondary school," she said. The Government would work with the states and territories "to implement a rigorous, content-based national history curriculum for all Australian students from kindergarten to year 12".

I question how we can teach Australian history, if we don't have Australian books that tell our stories. I firmly believe that Australian writers are best equipped and most inclined to write stories that reflect Australian history, in a voice that Australian children best relate to. This affects both Educational reading schemes and Trade publications.

Carol Wilkinson's book, 'The Night We Made the Flag' prompts students' inquiry into the history behind the Eureka Stockade. This can be further built on with 'A Banner Bold' in the My Australian Story series. These are two completely different texts, (one picture book and one novel) which intermesh to develop students' knowledge and ownership of our Australian history.

The Rigby Blue Prints scheme develops sequential reading resources that develop students' reading strategies while furthering their knowledge of Australian history. These books are published by an Australian Educational Publisher for use in primary school classrooms. The Rigby Blue Prints include a compilation of different texts, and short books, all written by Australian authors. The Australian voice and pride is very evident in these texts.

These are just a few examples of beautiful literature written by Australian authors and embraced by Australian schools. Without these texts and others like them, the Federal government initiatives in literacy and Australian history will be mute.

On page 4.1 of its report, the Productivity Commission states, 'Were PIR's removed, books – particularly educational texts – could potentially be imported from Asia at substantially lower prices, and Asia could also serve as a greater source of books more generally in the future.'

The belief that Asian books could replace Australian books is alarming. Reading manuals for many toys and electrical gadgets (that have come out of Asia) these days is sometimes like unravelling a secret code, as *Asian English* does not quite follow the conventions of English. Whilst they make admirable efforts, it is blatantly obvious that English is their second language. Meaning is often confused – and at times it would seem the instructions say the exact opposite to what they actually intend. To think that the commission is recommending this as the model for reading that we want to immerse our children in because it is a cheap alternative for educational texts, is incomprehensible, to say the least.

If our federal government seriously values Literacy *and* our Australian history, it likewise has to value and nurture the writers who are integral to both. The proposed changes to parallel importation *don't* reflect a commitment to Literacy and Australian identity in our schools.

As a writer, I take personal offence to the references about *psychic income*. It is insulting and degrading to hear that the *hours* I spend perfecting a text, and walking a book through the publication process, is not worth monetary recompense. Writing is *not* just about love. It is about work, discipline, dedication and talent. It takes considerable time, money and energy. It *is* driven by passion, but that is such a small part of the whole publication process.

To put things into perspective... It could be argued that politicians do what they do because they love it – get a buzz from it. (I don't believe they could do what they do if they didn't.) It's not the money that gets them across the line and keeps them in the battle – it's the passion and dedication. But even with that passion, they don't have to do it for nothing! It's not all about psychic income for politicians. Even at the lowest local levels of government there's fairly hefty remuneration for their labour of love.

Many people love their jobs and revel in their roles, pouring hours into their work – whilst still collecting their pay cheque at the end of the week. Why should writers be penalised because they bring passion and enthusiasm to their job? I see no reason why authors should be singled out for penalisation. **Recalling that authors – who usually birth the idea that drives the publication process – are paid roughly 10% of RRP on the book anyway. And picture book authors (of which I am one) receive just half of this. Less than the government collects out of GST.** Go figure! It is also important to realise that **these paltry figures are worked on Australian publishing rates – but authors receive just one third of this when books are published overseas.** Would you work for that? Or would you, like me, campaign strongly to hold onto the little that you have?

Literacy underpins all aspects of the school curriculum, and life in the global community. Clearly, writers provide the keys to unlock future leaders. I am asking that you show your support for Australian authors, illustrators, editors, publishers, booksellers, readers *and future generations* by opposing the proposed draft changes to parallel importation.

Yours sincerely,

Kathryn Apel