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I write in response to the Productivity Commission's Discussion Draft regarding the parallel importation of books. I made a submission to the commission during the initial round in January and was dismayed to read the recommendations put forward in the draft.

The period of copyright for an Australian author is currently life plus seventy years. The commission proposes that it is reduced to one year. One whole year. And after that year, anyone who wishes to quote huge tracts from an Australian author's work can do so without asking the permission of the author or their publisher. Essentially, this means that after one year Australian authors can see their work move into the public domain, for anyone to use at will. This could mean that any film-maker who wants to make a film based on an Australian book need not bother with film rights any more – they can just wait for twelve months and it's theirs for the taking. And there goes the author's income from film rights and, more importantly, their intellectual property. This is an extraordinary thing – an extraordinarily disrespectful thing. Clearly the commission believes that Australian authors' work is worth much, much less than that of the authors of every other country in the world. Perhaps they would like to explain just why they believe that – why they believe that a writer should spend a year or more on a book, a year or more seeing that book through the production process at a publishing house, and then have just twelve months to own its copyright.

So that's the copyright argument. Then there is the 'cheap books' argument. Australian books are not exorbitantly expensive compared to books in other countries – especially

not when you take into account exchange rates that often make our books cheaper by comparison. Moreover, if books in other countries *are* cheaper, it is not because parallel importation is allowed – it's only been allowed in one other territory, New Zealand, and books really are *not* cheaper there. It's probably because no GST is applied to books in over countries. GST is applied to many components of book production – to the paper, the designer's fee, the freelance editor's fee, and then on the retail price. If there were no GST on any of those components, the cost would come down considerably. But books are not exempt from GST and there has been no suggestion that this should be considered as a means to having 'cheaper books'. Quite apart from that, it seems to me that relying on 'cheaper books' imported from overseas markets is really an elaborate gamble on foreign exchange rates. If the Australian dollar takes a radical turn for the worse – and I believe we all know that anything can happen with economies and dollars – then suddenly that cheap American import becomes an expensive American import, and the booksellers will not keep that cost to themselves. But by then the customers won't have so many reasonably priced, locally produced books to choose instead.

In my previous submission I raised several points in regard to how the publishing industry works and how it would be affected by changes to the copyright laws implemented for the benefit of a handful of large book retailers. I will not go over those points again, but my sense of urgency and seriousness remains. Booksellers want 'cheaper books' to sell to their customers but don't seem to realise that the cost of the (only hypothetically) 'cheaper books' – the proposed change to copyright laws – devalues the work of a large percentage of the authors whose books they sell. If Australian publishers know they only have twelve months to make a return on a book – and twelve months is a breathtakingly short amount of time in publishing – they will soon decide that there are very few books worth that amount of effort. Thus, the changes proposed by the commission will so substantially alter the Australian publishing industry for the worse that the very retailers who want these mystical 'cheaper books' will find that, in fairly short order, there will be very few Australian books for them to sell to customers. Fewer Australian books means fewer Australian stories. Fewer Australian stories means that our national culture – not just literary, but film and television, which often rely on books for material, not to mention songwriters and painters who draw inspiration from books – will suffer, all in the name of some booksellers (not all) being able to import books at a reduced price which they may not necessarily pass on to their customers.

What I find most confusing about the recommendations is the fact that the commission believes that Australia should enter into a version of an arrangement that only one other country in the world thinks is a good idea – and it hasn't worked there. Australia does not have a unique writing, publishing and bookselling environment; we are not identical to Germany or the US or France, but we're not so different that we require such a massive change in order to make things 'competitive'. And, as in my last submission, I wonder what is so fundamentally wrong with bookselling in this country that these changes are necessary. Australian bookselling is healthy. Australians buy a lot of books, and quite often enjoy robust discounted prices on those books. If the Australian customer objected to the 'high cost' of books – and what price, really, can we put on our local culture? – surely they wouldn't buy so many of them. Again, I wonder, what is the real problem with the way things are now?

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