

16 April 2009

Parallel Importation of Books

Productivity Commission

GPO Box 1428

Canberra City ACT 2601

Dear Commissioners,

I have worked in the Australian publishing industry for some ten years, first with a publishing house and for the past five years for literary agency Jenny Darling & Associates. The views of both publishers and agents on the proposed changes to Australia's Parallel Importation Restrictions (PIRs) on books are being presented by their respective businesses and industry associations; I am not writing to you in a professional capacity. I write to you as an individual with a lifelong love of books and reading; a strong sense of Australian culture; and significant experience of the Australian publishing industry.

I spend hours each week discussing books with friends, family and often strangers, and yet I am aware of no evidence—empirical or anecdotal, certainly none has been provided to date by the Commission—that Australian consumers think books are too expensive. If Australians really want foreign editions of books they can legally order them from Amazon or via a bookseller. The PIRs don't prevent this. If they want cheap books they can shop at the discount department stores or at Australia Post outlets. If people want to buy poor quality remainders they already can from any number of retailers, though the legality of these editions is sometimes questionable. Those submissions in favour of an open market have come from retailers, not consumers. As far as I can tell, a couple of outspoken chains—who stand to reap the benefits of an open market at the cost of basically every other participant in the industry and at significant cost to Australian culture—seem to want to convince the book-buying public that they know what's best for everyone.

From where I'm standing it all seems fairly simple. Australian authors are read, recognised and loved both at home and internationally. Our books, writers and stories are able to travel because they are published first by passionate local publishers. These publishers can afford to invest in Australian writing and thereby contribute significantly to Australian culture because they, and the authors, have the security of territorial copyright. This is not a quirk unique to the Australian industry. Australian authors and publishers are not being mollycoddled. Authors in the USA and UK also have this fundamental right and those countries certainly aren't considering opening their borders to imports anytime soon.

It is staggering that at a time when the Australian Government is handing out cash grants to stimulate the economy, when we are implored to consider food miles and carbon footprints, the Commission should consider opening our book market and sending jobs and income straight offshore while inviting in books that do not reflect our own tastes, stories or culture.

In short, I have worked in Australian publishing for ten years and have seen it thrive under the current PIRs. Except for a small number of retailers nobody—certainly not consumers—is pushing for change to the status quo. It is impossible to imagine that our authors will be able to publish as successfully either here or abroad in the event that the PIRs on books are removed. The current PIRs mean that Australian producers—and I include both writers and publishers in that term—can participate in the international market on equal terms to those of their counterparts in the UK or the USA. Surely this is a sign of a successful industry and something we should preserve?

Yours sincerely,

Donica Bettanin