



Australian
Library and
Information
Association

28 May 2010

Ms Sue Blunden
Secretary
Joint Committee on Publications
Parliament House
Canberra ACT
Sue.Blunden@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Blunden,

I am very pleased to provide a submission from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) to the Joint Committee on Publications Inquiry into the Electronic Distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series.

Background

The Australian Library and Information Association is the peak body representing the library and information services sector. It represents 6,000 members, the library and information profession, Australian library and information services, and the interests of over 12 million library users.

We are committed to promoting the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy.

We advocate the development of an informed society that can partake and participate in skilled decision-making. Accurate, relevant and timely information is the key ingredient to effective decision-making. Australia's long-term economic development is dependent on its ability to use information to make decisions that enable growth, progress and productivity.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

The Parliamentary Papers are an enormously important documentary record of the development of national policy and consideration by the parliament of significant issues. The reports of committees are, for example, extremely thoughtful considered works which take into account extensive public consultation in the development of policy recommendations. The Parliamentary Papers also provide a critical resource to enable scrutiny of the work of parliament and development of policy. Access to the set is essential for an informed citizenry and for engagement with Australians.



Increasingly Australians are accessing information such as the Parliamentary Papers online. Finding the papers online is a considerable challenge, as noted by the Australian National Audit Office report *Online Availability of Government Entities' Documents Tabled in the Australian Parliament* (http://www.anao.gov.au/uploads/documents/2008-09_Audit_Report_37.pdf), with some papers simply not being available in electronic form.

Australia has a proud history of publishing and distributing parliamentary and government information. Government information was the earliest material printed in the colony. The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, first published in 5 March 1803, is Australia's first government publication and newspaper providing information to the then small population. It was basically a weekly official medium for the publication of official notices. Indeed the masthead prominently stated, "Published by Authority".

Since then government and parliamentary information has grown vastly to many thousands of reports and papers each year. For an informed nation we suggest that:

1. It would be very beneficial for all documents tabled in Parliament that are ordered to be printed to be made available through the Parliament in electronic form with strategies to ensure long term access. This would enable Australians to see this great national resource in a single place, without facing barriers of the current environment where some papers are not available electronically and other are extremely difficult to locate. It would also enable these very significant materials to be located together as a documentary record of the Parliament and its consideration of national issues. Such a repository would also eliminate the current problems of agencies changing names and web sites and "cleansing" their websites of older material.
2. It is vital that access be on the basis of long term permanent access to ensure that the nation's records are available for contemporary and historical purposes. Destroying or deleting historic materials would not be consistent with the philosophy of a strong, informed democracy. Destruction of these resources would limit the ability of citizens to engage effectively in policy development and democratic processes.
3. We do not believe that there are technological barriers. If the publications were stored electronically by the Parliament and made accessible on the web, access would be through the website as well as search engines. Accessibility is, however an important issue. The papers need to be made available in a way that ensures accessibility standards are met and those with print disabilities can read or hear the content of the publications.
4. I recommend that the document be stored together with the metadata – that is the descriptions of the Parliamentary Papers such as author, title and Parliamentary Paper number. I recommend that in addition to storing

the material in a ParlInfo repository, a special web page be established to enable access to the resources such as a separate Hansard in the Parliament of Australia website.

5. The administration of a repository needs to support timely publication of documents in an efficient manner. It is important that such a service take in existing online publications with a streamlined process.

The current paper based system has operated for the past 50 years with collections of Parliamentary Papers made available to the public through libraries. In practice only those physically located close to a deposit library with knowledge, time and an awareness of the series have benefited from the collections. This is but a very very tiny proportion of the population.

Opening up access to these very important documents will enhance access to the Parliamentary Papers in a way that gives a path from all computers with internet access as well as through public libraries as they support their patrons' use of online resources to a very significant extent. Taking away the physical barriers can increase awareness of the consideration of important reports by the Parliament and, indeed, the role of the Parliament across the nation.

Recommendation

I highly recommend the publication of the full text of Parliamentary Papers through a national repository based in the parliamentary network providing long-term access through modern systems supporting full text searching, RSS feeds, alerts and other mechanisms to assist Australians to participate in our great democracy.

Yours sincerely,



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