

Proposed amendment to Flags Act

THE POSITION IN BRIEF: If the amendment is carried I believe it would disadvantage the Australian flag industry and would restrict the supply of flags to the Australian Government and its various departments.

STRUCTURE OF THE INDUSTRY: The Australian flag industry comprises a small number of flag printers and fewer flag sewers. Flag printers have largely discontinued dispersal dye printing because of its relative cost and are now using digital printing machines which deposit the printed image on the surface of the cloth. The print does not penetrate the cloth as was the case with dye printing, meaning that the cloth must be transparent enough to allow the print to be seen from the reverse side of the flag. This in turn results in a flag which wears out sooner than the traditional flag bunting. Longevity ratio is about 2 : 1.

Substrates for digital printing are knitted polyester flag cloth which is not made in Australia. Digitally printed Australian flags are part of the government's period supply contracts.

Sewn flags are mainly made of woven polyester flag bunting, a tough weave which stands up well to the whipping in the wind which is natural for a flag and which wears it out. Flag bunting is not made in Australia. In the 1900s it was made by Bradmill and also Birkmyre. The latter discontinued bunting late in the decade, leaving Bradmill which made a weaker fabric. James Nelson of Tasmania stepped into the breach with a stronger fabric which soon restricted Bradmill and caused them to discontinue early this century. Soon Australian flag makers were supplied by a cheaper product of equal quality to Nelson's and they in turn discontinued. This latter product is made in China and is available in all required colours,

Flag bunting cannot be digitally printed because the image on the obverse cannot be seen from the reverse. Bunting Australian National flags for the Australian government once were dye screen printed but this method is no longer used and Australian printers would be highly unlikely to reassemble this capacity given the relatively small number required.

Finally, the structure of the industry here comprises one dominant flag printer who does not sew flags and who subcontracts sewn flags to smaller manufacturers.

POSSIBLE EFFECT OF PASSING THE AMENDMENT: My company, Flags of All Nations is a specialist sewn flag manufacturer making flags for many government departments, defence and the like. Half of our output is to trade resellers who also secure orders from government departments, so that we are obliged to stock flag bunting in all required colours, as well as Australian flag blue and red. We are able to buy these colours by the roll, which is economically essential because we are a small outfit.

If the amendment is passed and we were obliged to use bunting made in Australia, we would not be able to buy colours by the roll – by the dye batch. This is beyond our means and we would not be able to make government department flags. The same would apply with other flag sewers because there is none in the industry bigger than ourselves.

SUMMARY: The lowest priced Australian National flags sold to the Australian government are digital prints on knitted polyester made overseas. There is no Australian manufacturer of substrates suitable for digitally printed flags. At present there is no Australian manufacturer of polyester flag bunting. Should one be found willing to make it, they would be competing against a Chinese product of known high quality. Small flag sewers would be unable to buy necessary colours in single rolls (which often take years to be used up) and would be forced to discontinue making government department flags.