

JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Inquiry into the development of a digital repository and electronic distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series

SUBMISSION

SUBMISSION NUMBER: **6**

SUBMITTER: **Department of the Senate**



AUSTRALIAN SENATE

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28 May 2010

Ms Sue Blunden
 Secretary
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Dear Ms Blunden

**ELECTRONIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS SERIES
 SUBMISSION BY THE DEPARTMENT OF THE SENATE**

Thank you for your letter of 17 May 2010 inviting the Department of the Senate to make a submission to the committee for this inquiry.

As the committee is aware, the Parliamentary Papers Series (PPS) is the only comprehensive series of documents recording the operations of the Australian Parliament and its committees and of the Commonwealth government, and has been printed since Federation. It brings together in one series a wide variety of reports which provide researchers with a consolidated record of many aspects of Australian government.

The Department of the Senate's interest in the PPS is twofold. First, the department is responsible for co-administering and providing the funding for the series with the Department of the House of Representatives. Secondly, the department is a major contributor to the PPS with all Senate committee reports, reports of joint committees administered by the department, *Business of the Senate*, *Work of Committees* and the departmental annual report included in the series. Over the past five and a half years approximately 30 per cent of the total documents comprising the PPS were documents published by the Senate.

I make the following comments in relation to the committee's terms of reference.

(a) The online availability of documents tabled in Parliament

All Senate committee reports, reports of joint committees administered by the department, *Business of the Senate*, *Work of Committees* and the departmental annual report are provided online as soon as they are tabled. The committee reports are available at the individual committee websites, together with other associated documents such as submissions and transcripts. Reports of all other parliamentary committees are also made available online at their relevant webpage through the Parliament House website.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet *Guidelines for the Presentation of Documents to Parliament* require departments and agencies to make their tabled (or government) documents available online and to ensure that the online document is identical to the printed tabled document. The Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) also places requirements on departments and agencies when making their documents available online. The online access to these documents (usually comprising annual reports, Auditor-General's reports etc) is becoming more consistent over time. However, the documents are available only through the author agency websites. A cursory check of documents tabled in the Senate and their availability on author websites suggests that the ease of access varies from website to website and, in some cases, documents were not able to be located.

Difficulties with accessing executive department documents have also been identified when changes to administrative arrangements occur. In these circumstances departments and agencies change their websites to reflect the administrative changes and, in some cases, not only have links to documents been lost but websites have disappeared completely.

An online PPS would provide a central location from which to access these particular documents, rather than users having to access them across disparate websites, which sometimes no longer exist. A requirement should be placed on agencies to provide electronic files of documents at the same time as they provide printed copies for tabling in Parliament. It would then be possible for the chamber departments, once a document is ordered to be printed, to provide immediate online access to those documents from a central location. Of course, this would not affect author agencies continuing to publish these documents on their websites.

(b) The short and long-term access to documents tabled in Parliament

As mentioned earlier, Senate committee reports, as well as all parliamentary committee reports, are made available on the Parliament House website when tabled. Senate committee reports for the current and past four parliaments (ie. from 1996 to 2010) are available online. The Senate Committee Office has also identified "significant" committee reports before this period and made them available online. All reports of the Senate Committee of Privileges since its establishment in 1966 are also available on that committee's website.

Short-term access to government documents tabled in Parliament (which are routinely included in the PPS) is usually not an issue as agencies are required by AGIMO to provide online access to documents they present to Parliament. However, long-term access to documents from these websites has been an ongoing issue because agencies are not required to provide any online archival repository for their documents. Consequently, any development of online access to parliamentary papers by providing a link to these websites has been unable to guarantee the necessary long-term access. Changes to administrative arrangements may also cause access issues both in the short and long-term.

The Department of the Senate is microfilming and digitising all documents tabled in the Senate since 1901. The documents in the Senate Tabled Papers database are then made available online. Due to the volume of documents in this collection there is a time lag between the tabling of a document and its publication online. Currently the documents which were tabled in the Senate in mid 2008 are being scanned in preparation for digitising. The availability of electronic files of government documents would provide efficiencies for this project and potentially provide synergies for other similar projects within Parliament House. Conversely, these projects could supply an electronic PPS with documents from earlier years' series.

Reliable long-term access to documents tabled in Parliament is more likely to be achieved through the development of a central online repository administered by the parliamentary departments. Any such development must guarantee long-term access.

(c) Technological barriers

The committee's 2006 report identified several issues which have made the development of an electronic PPS difficult. One model explored was one that would have a centralised index for the series that hyperlinked to documents located on author agencies' web sites, but this was shown to be especially problematic over time where the dynamic nature of many government websites could result in broken links, adversely affecting the accessibility of documents. The Department of the Senate considers that the risk in this model remains and it is therefore not a viable option.

Another model considered was an online digital repository but the cost was considered too prohibitive. The information technology architecture, including server memory and software design, is significant. However, notwithstanding some upfront capital cost, the department believes such costs to be less today than previously estimated, particularly in terms of establishment costs. The existing information systems in the parliamentary environment could provide the foundation for an online repository thereby greatly reducing development costs. The chamber departments currently administer a shared database which has all the metadata required for such a repository and ParlInfo Search, administered by the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS), could provide the search functionality together with the necessary hardware infrastructure required to maintain an electronic PPS. Based on a conservative estimate of an average file size of 5.5 megabytes, each year's series would require 2.4 gigabytes of server memory.¹ The department understands that DPS has developed an increased server capability of which the sum required could be allocated for this purpose. The department would support development of a digital repository hosted within the Parliament.

The current DPS project to replace the Australian Parliament House (aph) website may provide additional or alternative platforms for hosting a digital repository for the PPS. If so, any future redevelopments to the aph website must ensure ongoing access for the online PPS. Importantly, the development of an online PPS at this point in time will coincide with the redevelopment of the chamber departments' Document Production System (discussed below) and the redevelopment of the aph website, offering an opportune time to develop an efficient and high quality PPS for the Australian community.

¹ This estimate does not include server backup requirements.

Another issue concerns the longevity of technology that enables digital files to be read. Obsolete technology or that which is not compatible retrospectively presents risk to the ongoing availability of past years' documents within the series. To overcome any continuity of access issues an electronic PPS should have the necessary technology embedded into it to enable the successful downloading and reading of its digital files into the future.

The department notes the accessibility requirements placed on Commonwealth agencies that publish information online, namely that online publishing be in formats that enable accessibility to people with a disability. Therefore, appropriate measures need to be put in place to meet this objective. Providing the series in formats including portable document format (PDF) as well as rich text or HTML should enable the broadest accessibility for the community. However, at minimum, files must be in PDF so that the virtual copy is a true representation of the tabled hard copy. It should be noted though, that an online PPS even in a basic form (ie. PDF only) would make the series significantly more accessible to a wider audience than the current paper copy distribution arrangements.

(d) Options for a digital repository and electronic distribution

As stated above, the Department of the Senate considers that the existing information systems in the parliamentary environment could deliver an online PPS. The metadata from the chamber departments' shared database is already ingested into ParlInfo Search, making ParlInfo Search a suitable repository. Parliamentary papers could be searched within ParlInfo Search and indexes for each year's series could also be made available on the Senate, House of Representatives and joint committee's web pages. These indexes would provide hyperlinks to the parliamentary papers within ParlInfo Search. Given that these indexes would coexist in the same overall system as the repository, this should overcome the broken link issue mentioned earlier.

Over recent months the Senate Table Office has, together with the House of Representatives Table Office, undertaken a review of their document production system and associated databases and concluded that there is a need to redevelop these systems. This redevelopment could also include the development of an electronic PPS at marginal additional cost to the total project. Although this redevelopment is not essential to delivering an online PPS, it would enable improved management of the metadata thereby allowing it to be used for multiple purposes. By redeveloping the database to perform multiple tasks, for which it was not originally intended, the presentation of information at the users' end within ParlInfo Search could be greatly improved from its current state.

For efficient administration of an electronic series author bodies should be required to provide their documents in specified formats which enable simple integration into a repository.

Distribution of the series in any other electronic format, for example, on DVD, should only be considered if distribution of the printed series is discontinued and possibly as a cost-recovery, subscription service only. Providing the PPS simultaneously in numerous formats (in print, online and DVD) would increase the resources needed to provide the series, jeopardising its future sustainability.

With the limitless access to information provided by the internet and the demand for that information by users, the department would expect that the need for distribution of the PPS in paper format would diminish with the development of an electronic PPS. This reduction in distribution would provide administrative and financial savings to both chamber departments. As a major contributor to the PPS, the Department of the Senate would also make considerable savings as a result of having to print fewer copies of Senate documents.

(e) Administration of an electronic PPS

The Department of the Senate has always maintained the view that the administration of the PPS lies with the Parliament, through the two chamber departments. The department believes that, if a single digital repository for the PPS is to be pursued, the responsibility for developing it resides with the two chamber departments. The administrative arrangements of Parliament and its information technology architecture provide a strong and stable base from which an efficient electronic PPS can be developed and also provide cost savings and efficiencies beyond the confines of Parliament House.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rosemary Laing".

(Rosemary Laing)