

JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

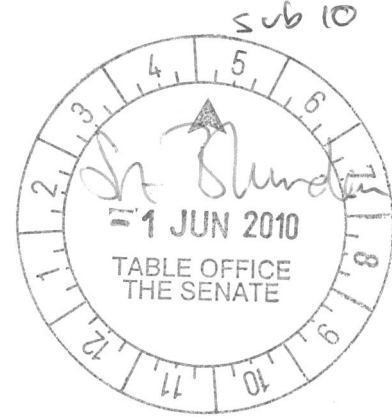
Inquiry into the development of a digital repository and electronic distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series

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DEPARTMENT OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



Joint Committee on Publications—Inquiry into Electronic Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series

Submission by the Clerk of the House

1 June 2010

The submission outlines relevant background to the current inquiry, including previous examination of the issue of digital repositories for, and electronic distribution of, the PPS, and subsequent developments. The conclusion is that it is now time to consider a central digital repository for the PPS as an alternative or adjunct to hard copy distribution. The submission recommends that the parliamentary departments prepare a business case for a central repository for the PPS in the Parliament, based on the Tabled Papers Register and administered by the chamber departments, with electronic versions of documents to be provided by agencies.

Joint Committee on Publications—Inquiry into Electronic Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series

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Background

The Parliamentary Papers Series

In 2008-09, over 6,500 documents were presented to the House of Representatives.¹ Delegated legislation comprises the vast majority of these documents. The remaining documents, 760 on average in recent years, include annual reports of government departments and agencies, parliamentary committee reports, Auditor-General reports, and other ad-hoc documents. The Parliamentary Papers Series (PPS) is a subset of these documents, selected by either the House of Representatives or the Senate, often on the recommendation of the respective Publications Committee. On average, around 430 documents are included in the series each year.

The Department's role in the PPS

The Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of the Senate, undertake a number of functions in the administration of the PPS.² These include support for the Joint Committee on Publications (JCP) and each House's individual Publications Committee, allocating the individual Parliamentary Paper number for each document selected for inclusion in the series, maintaining distribution lists for the series, liaising with and contract management of the distribution agent, Canprint Communications Pty Ltd, indexing, and provision of online information, including a Tabled Papers Register. The cost for each chamber department is approximately \$60,000 per year, not including staff costs.

Changes in the PPS

Over the years there have been many changes to the PPS. These include changes in format, restrictions in the eligibility to receive the series free of charge, a substantial reduction in the number of copies required for distribution and a reduction in the costs associated with the series. The principle has been to make the series as widely available as possible while containing the costs of the series to a manageable level.

Format changes

The PPS is currently available to recipients as a B5 pamphlet copy of each document, on which a label is placed on the back cover, indicating the Parliamentary Paper number and year of that document. These documents are distributed as they are processed by Canprint Communications Pty Ltd.

In the past, recipients have been able to receive the series in a variety of additional formats. Between 2007 and 2009, recipients could elect to receive untrimmed (slightly oversized B5) copies which would enable future binding. Like the pamphlet copies, these were distributed as they were processed by Canprint.

From the mid 1990s until 2006, the untrimmed copies of documents were held by Canprint until all documents for that year were received and processed. They were then collated and together with an index, shrink-wrapped and distributed to recipients as blister packs.

¹ Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual Report 2008-09*, p. 18.

² Other functions in the administration of the PPS are set out in the department's submission to the Joint Committee on Publications inquiry in 2006 into the distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series.

Prior to the mid 1990s, the Department provided 24 recipients with bound volumes of each year's series. Only three bound volumes are now produced; one each for the Department of the House of Representatives, the Department of the Senate and the Department of Parliamentary Services. The three departments share the cost of this binding.

Eligibility restrictions

Hard copies of the PPS are provided free of charge to eligible recipients according to guidelines approved by the Presiding Officers, as amended from time to time. As mentioned, eligibility for the free distribution list has been progressively restricted over the years. Examples include the removal of secondary schools, the Parliamentary Press Gallery and newspapers from the free distribution list following the JCP's 1986 report³ and the removal of foreign embassies in 2006.⁴ Currently 51 organisations receive the series.

The number of copies received by recipients has also been reduced to a single copy, following a decision of the Presiding Officers in 2005.

Copies required for distribution

Changes to the eligibility guidelines also affect the number of copies required for distribution to recipients. In 1971 there were between 284 and 370 copies of documents (documents were grouped according to subject areas) provided on the free distribution list.⁵ This had fallen to 203 copies in 1996,⁶ and currently 91 copies are distributed to recipients (including 40 archival copies for the chamber departments).

The increasing availability of documents online has also had an effect on the numbers of documents with several libraries citing this as a reason in their requests to be removed from the free distribution list.

Cost of the series

The total annual cost of the PPS peaked at over \$700,000 in 1975-76.⁷ Since then, the cost of producing the PPS has been substantially reduced and has been around \$120,000 for several years. This figure does not include salary costs for the chamber departments and the costs incurred by author bodies in providing copies of documents for distribution. The reduction has come at a cost to recipients; services such as free binding and, more recently, the provision of blister packs, have been discontinued. If an electronic PPS were implemented, there would be some cost savings for author bodies which would be required to provide fewer copies of reports.

Terms of Reference

(a) The online availability of documents tabled in the Parliament

Previous Publications Committee reports

The JCP has a long history of investigating alternatives to hard copy distribution of the PPS. As early as 1977, the Committee identified the potential of alternatives to paper to provide

³ JCP, *Review of the Cost and Distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series*, 1986, pp. 21-22.

⁴ JCP, *Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series*, Canberra, 2006, p. 8.

⁵ JCP, *Report relating to the distribution and pricing of Parliamentary Publications*, Canberra, 1971, p. 54.

⁶ JCP, *Future of the Parliamentary Papers Series*, Canberra, 1997, p. 9.

⁷ JCP, *Inquiry into the purpose, scope and distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series*, Canberra, 1977, p. 24.

“substantial savings in space, easier referral and cost savings” and recommended the PPS be produced in a microform version.⁸

In 1986, the Committee extended this investigation to electronic versions of documents, specifically the use of CD-ROM technology, however it believed then, as it also did in 1997, that replacing hard copy provision with electronic was premature.⁹

In 2006, the Committee outlined the benefits of making Parliamentary documents available online. These included:

- more immediate and wider access to the series;
- increasing flexibility to search for information; and
- long term cost effectiveness.¹⁰

The department agrees that these benefits would be realised with increased online availability of documents. There is usually some delay in the distribution of hard copy documents, because of time spent processing each document or a delay in the supply of the documents to the distributor. As internet use increases, more people are able to access the series from their homes, rather than by visiting a library.

Current situation

Under guidelines issued by the Australian Government Information Management Office, agencies are required to publish online documents presented to the Parliament.¹¹ The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet’s guidelines for the presentation of documents to the Parliament require government documents that are presented to Parliament to be available online once tabled.¹² The reference in the latter guidelines is to those documents including government reports, annual reports and responses to parliamentary committees, which, in the House of Representatives, are presented by a Minister after question time each sitting day. Such documents can be found on individual agency websites. The publications.gov.au website provides a search engine to find government publications and provides links to those publications on the agency websites. As previously mentioned, the PPS comprises a subset of these documents, together with other documents including parliamentary committee reports and reports of the Auditor-General.

The department publishes online all reports of parliamentary committees for which it provides secretariat support and key chamber documents such as the Notice Paper and the Votes and Proceedings. These documents are published to the department’s web pages on the aph.gov.au site, as well as onto Parlinfo Search. The department also publishes bills and associated documents online via Parlinfo Search. Copies of House Committee reports have been routinely provided online from the 38th Parliament, and older committee reports are being progressively back-captured to provide a complete online record.

⁸ JCP, *Inquiry into the purpose, scope and distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series*, p. 31.

⁹ JCP, *Review of the Cost and Distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series*, 1986, p. 34; *Future of the Parliamentary Papers Series*, p. 22.

¹⁰ JCP, *Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series*, p. 29.

¹¹ Documents Tabled in Parliament, downloaded on 28 May 2010 from http://webpublishing.agimo.gov.au/Documents_Tabled_in_Parliament.

¹² Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Guidelines for the presentation of documents to the Parliament*, Canberra, January 2010, pp. 3 and 8.

The Senate Tabled Papers database hosts scanned copies of documents presented to the Senate. A pilot of the database which includes documents presented from 2002 to 2004 is currently available online. This database does not include documents presented in the House of Representatives but not in the Senate, such as House Committee reports, and so is not a complete repository of all tabled papers.

ANAO report on online publishing

In 2009 the Australian National Audit Office conducted a review of the online availability of government entities' documents presented to Parliament.¹³ The ANAO found that the online availability of presented documents had improved over time, although at least 10% of documents in any given year were not available online. This was due to a number of factors, including the lack of a web presence by the author agency, a lack of awareness of the requirements to publish online, and the reorganisation of agencies and portfolios due to machinery of government changes.¹⁴

To improve the level of online existence of 'tabled papers', the ANAO suggested that a parliamentary department host an electronic repository of such documents.¹⁵ The ANAO noted that 'there would be lower costs if a Parliamentary repository focussed on the Parliamentary Papers Series'.¹⁶ It is important to note that the ANAO reference to 'tabled paper' is to only a subset of all documents presented. In its report, the ANAO defined a 'tabled paper' as a tabled document published by a government entity and listed in the Parliamentary Library's Index of Tabled Papers.¹⁷ Broadly, this covers the 'remaining documents' referred to in paragraph 1, representing on average, 760 documents per year. The ANAO definition encompasses all documents in the PPS. The department's response to the ANAO suggestion was that it would consult with the other parliamentary departments on the establishment of a repository. Subsequently, the parliamentary departments have developed a Tabled Papers Register.

Tabled Papers Register

The Tabled Papers Register was made publicly available on the Parliament House website in April 2010 via the Parlinfo Search engine. The Register provides information on all documents presented to Parliament, including the date of presentation, title, and whether the document is part of the PPS. The parliamentary departments developed the Register through an interface with existing software, the Table Office Papers Database. Although the Register currently does not contain or link to electronic copies of the document, provision was made to enable this to occur, with minor changes to the database to accommodate certain document types.

In its submission to the JCP's inquiry in 2005-06 into the distribution of the PPS, the department suggested that it was not then inclined to pursue the provision of an electronic repository without evidence of unmet demand. This was because there were then inherent problems in preserving digital records which needed to be further progressed, and, as individual documents were generally available electronically—although not in a central repository—it was preferable to pursue enhanced and longer term access to the existing online material.

¹³ Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), *Online availability of Government entities' documents tabled in the Australian Parliament*, Performance Audit No. 37, 2008-09, Canberra.

¹⁴ ANAO, *op cit*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁵ ANAO, *op cit*, p. 36.

¹⁶ ANAO, *op cit*, p. 36.

¹⁷ ANAO, *op cit*, p. 10.

Four years on, the department has become aware that there is at least some demand for a central repository of information. The department has received queries about online publications from several libraries, which cite a shortage of storage space as one reason an electronic repository would be as, if not more, desirable than hard copy documents. In addition, as mentioned, the ANAO has supported a central repository for tabled papers hosted by a parliamentary department. In its response to the ANAO report, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet considered that the Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of the Senate should be responsible for establishing the repository.¹⁸ A further consideration is that a suitable platform has become available within the Parliament with the development of the Tabled Papers Register.

(b) The short and long term access to documents included in the PPS

Prior to the widespread publication of documents presented to Parliament, the PPS was seen to have a role in disseminating those documents that were considered to be of sufficient importance or public interest to warrant printing [as Parliamentary Papers]. The 1964 report of the Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary and Government Publications gave two objectives for the PPS:

- that adequate copies are available to all who wish to have a copy; and
- that the documents are available to be bound into volumes and preserved in a convenient and accessible form as a permanent record.¹⁹

The Joint Select Committee also stated that “publications should be available to all interested persons as soon as they are published.”²⁰ In practice, however, delays in the distribution of the PPS in hard copy form have meant that this objective has not been met. The online availability of documents on agency websites has seen improvements in immediate access by the public.

Bound volumes, held in major public and university libraries, were seen as providing long term access to the PPS. Since the mid-90s, however, the department has ceased to provide ready-bound copies to libraries, instead relying on the libraries themselves to bind their PPS copies. As a result, bound volumes may no longer be routinely available from PPS recipient libraries, diminishing the value of the PPS.

In its 1986 report, the JCP was reluctant to endorse alternatives to hard copy on the basis that it “has a responsibility to ensure the widest possible public access to documents tabled in the Parliament”.²¹ Likewise, in its response to the 1986 report, the Government was keen to ensure that any changes to the distribution of the series “not in practice limit community access”.²² With the increasing online availability of government documents and increasing levels of community access to the internet, these issues have diminished in significance today—certainly for short term access to electronic documents.

¹⁸ ANAO, op cit, p. 62.

¹⁹ Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary and Government Publications, *Report*, Canberra, 1964, p. 26.

²⁰ Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary and Government Publications, op cit, p. 20.

²¹ JCP, *Review of the Cost and Distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series*, p. 20.

²² Government response to Joint Committee on Publications – Review of the cost and distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series.

Placing PPS documents online in a central repository would facilitate access to documents. It may lead to some libraries choosing to abandon their hard copy collections of the PPS and to rely instead on access to the electronic versions. The issue of long term access to electronic documents would need to be addressed.

(c) Technological barriers

Several barriers to an electronic PPS were identified in the Publications Committee's 2006 report. These included limited community access to the internet and ensuring that changing technology did not render documents unreadable in the future.²³

Access to the Internet

The Joint Committee's 2006 report stated that limited access to the internet by home, library and public service users would be barriers to accessing an electronic PPS. At that time it was estimated that 53% of Australians had home internet access.

In 2008-09 the level of home internet access had risen to 78%, with 62% having a broadband connection,²⁴ which would enable large documents to be downloaded more quickly. The higher level of home internet use and the rapid uptake of mobile devices which can access the internet, such as smart phones or text readers such as the iPad, may mean that more people may currently access PPS documents electronically than would access hard copy versions.

Future readability of documents

It is essential for the long term access of the electronic PPS that file formats continue to be readable into the future. The principle would be to ensure, whenever technological changes are made to the repository, that the document formats can be migrated and updated at the same time to maintain accessibility. The issue would need to be addressed in developing a business case (page 8 refers).

Online accessibility

The ANAO discussed the issue of online accessibility in its audit report. It stated that making documents available in html format would make them viewable by any standard web browser, ensuring access by a wide variety of users. It would also comply with the standard recommended by the Australian Human Rights Commission to provide equitable access to people with disabilities.²⁵

In addition to the format of the electronic document, large documents can also be a barrier to accessibility, causing slow download times for documents of which only a small part may be of interest to the user. Fragmenting documents would assist in reducing download times but would raise issues of consistency, standards, and complexity of loading and searching.

The issue of accessibility would also need to be addressed in the development of a business case.

²³ JCP, *Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series*, pp. 33-34.

²⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *8146.0 – Household use of information technology, Australia, 2008-09*, see <http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8146.0> [accessed online 24/5/2010].

²⁵ ANAO, *op cit*, pp. 39-41.

(d) Options for a digital repository and electronic distribution

There are two options to provide access to electronic copies through a repository:

- providing links to existing online documents; or
- hosting the actual documents.

The department does not support the option of hyperlinks to existing online documents, principally because long term access to electronic documents on external websites cannot be assured.

The department considers that it is now time to consider a central digital repository for the PPS as an alternative or adjunct to hard copy distribution. **It recommends that the parliamentary departments prepare a business case for a central repository in the Parliament, based on the Tabled Papers Register and administered by the chamber departments, with electronic versions of documents provided by agencies.**

The issues to be assessed are:

- demand for a central repository
- the scope of the repository – the documents to be included
- the format of the documents—to ensure accessibility and long term access
- the costs of the repository.

Demand

Demand is difficult to assess, as it would be likely if persons were surveyed that they would indicate support for a central electronic repository. Recipients currently eligible to receive free copies of the PPS in hard copy form could be asked about their preference for continuing to receive hard copies, or having access to a central digital repository.

Inclusion of documents

The department believes that priority for online availability should be given to the subset of reports which comprise the PPS. However, as the status of the document is not known at presentation, it would be appropriate for electronic versions of all government documents under the jurisdiction of the PM&C Tabling Officer, together with Auditor-General Reports and parliamentary committee reports, to be made available to the chamber departments on presentation.

The department would not envisage extension of the Register to delegated legislation. A significant component of delegated legislation, legislative instruments, is already published online through the authoritative source for such documents, the Federal Register of Legislative Instruments. Extension of online publication of such material is appropriately the province of the Attorney-General's Department.

Format of documents

As mentioned, some further investigation would be required to determine the ideal format or formats of the documents to be received from the author agencies. Issues such as the ability to migrate documents to future platforms to ensure their long term availability and the best way to ensure accessibility to the documents by the disabled will need to be addressed. Future developments in delivering the repository (eg, to mobile devices) should be factored into a solution, if practicable.

Costs

The chamber departments will incur some additional costs in providing an electronic repository, primarily to upload electronic documents to ParlInfo Search. The workload involved would depend on whether documents were reliably provided by agencies on a timely basis.

These costs have not yet been quantified. It is noted, however, that following the JCP's 2006 report, the department met with stakeholders to discuss the possibility that the National Library of Australia host a repository for the PPS via Pandora, which is a collection of online publications. The cost of this option was then estimated at around \$95,000 per year, and, because of the cost, the idea was not pursued further. Additional costs would be offset, or partly offset, for the chamber departments by no longer producing and distributing a hard copy version of the PPS. There would also be savings for author agencies which would be required to provide fewer hard copies.

The chamber departments would be responsible, together with agencies, for ensuring that all relevant documents were available online in a suitable format(s) and in a timely fashion. At this stage, it is proposed that the repository be prospective only.

It is yet to be seen whether the extra services could be delivered using existing resources. Potential trade-offs may need to be made in areas such as liaising with agencies to provide documents not immediately available, with priority initially given to those documents comprising the PPS. If the business case showed that there would be net additional costs, the department would require additional funding (recognising that there may be a net saving to the Commonwealth overall from reduced printing costs for author agencies).

Electronic distribution

The Parlinfo Search application provides the ability to save searches and to create alerts based on those searches. When new results are found, a notifying email is sent. A search for new PPS documents could be included as a system defined alert, to assist users in setting up this alert.

Once all documents for a yearly series were available in electronic form, a CD-ROM could be produced and distributed as per the Presiding Officers guidelines, if requested. This could possibly be a more cost-effective method of distributing the series and it would depend on demand from eligible recipients before the product was offered to recipients. As the Committee noted in its 2006 report, however, there are question marks surrounding the long-term usability of CD-ROMs.

(e) Administration for an e-PPS

Retaining the existing administrative structure

Currently, the department shares the administration of the PPS with the Department of the Senate, with officers in both Table Offices providing this role. Responsibility for the processing of individual documents and the associated costs is split between the chamber departments according to agency names: agencies from A to M are the responsibility of the Department of the Senate; agencies from N to Z, Budget documents and Auditor-General Reports are the responsibility of the Department of the House of Representatives.

As previously mentioned, and subject to a business case assessment, the department considers that it is time to consider an electronic repository of the PPS to be jointly administered by the

chamber departments, with each Table Office sourcing, loading and publishing those documents for which it has traditionally been responsible.

Timely provision of documents

For an electronic PPS repository to successfully provide a better service, it would be important that documents were published in a timely manner and preferably as soon after presentation as possible.

For this to occur, electronic versions of the documents would need to be provided to the Table Offices prior to tabling. This could be done via a dedicated email address, accessible by staff of both Table Offices and/or by safe-hand delivery of the documents in suitable format(s) on a CD-ROM. Agencies would need to ensure that the electronic version of the document was consistent with the document presented. At this stage, no move away from hard copy presentation is envisaged.

If a document was not supplied electronically by an agency, the relevant Table Office would then contact that agency—possibly through the PM&C Tabling Officer. This, however, would represent an additional requirement during a sitting day and such follow-up may not be possible on the same day as the presentation of the document, leading to delays in the online publishing to the repository.

If an agency was unable to provide an electronic copy of a document, the department would need to scan the hard copy document to obtain a PDF version. This would be a last resort, however, with priority for scanning given to PPS documents rather than those that had not been included in the series.

Role of the Joint Committee on Publications

The department sees a role for the JCP in ensuring the completeness of a PPS repository. Similar to the requirement for agencies to provide hard copies for PPS distribution, the Committee could insert into its printing standards a requirement that agencies provide electronic copies of documents for presentation, in appropriate formats, to the chamber departments.

The JCP could also take the step of reporting any agencies that have not supplied an electronic version to Parliament, as an extension of the report it makes in relation to the provision of hard copies. A yearly report may not be timely enough so the department would suggest reporting at the end of the Autumn, Budget and Spring sittings. This would have the effect of encouraging compliance with the requirements.

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet guidelines

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet tabling guidelines would need to be updated to reflect any requirement to provide electronic versions of documents to the Table Offices, including government reports, annual reports of departments and agencies and government responses to parliamentary committee reports.