



19 October 2005

Mr Jason Sherd
Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Publications
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr. Sherd

Inquiry into the Distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series

Thank you for the opportunity for the Australian Government Libraries Information Network (AGLIN) to respond to the inquiry on the distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series.

AGLIN membership is open to Australian Government libraries and information services and among its aims are to:

- represent the interests and concerns of member libraries and information services in wider government forums
- develop and implement co-operative schemes and resource sharing activities among Australian Government libraries and information services
- serve as a forum to consider and reach consensus on issues and policies which affect Australian Government libraries and information services
- promote improved access to information by Australian Government agencies and their staff
- develop a capacity for the provision of expert advisory services to its members and other organisations as appropriate in such areas as:
 - cost effective procurement of library materials, systems and other services
 - foster and facilitate the dissemination of Australian Government publications to the wider community by:
 - ensuring appropriate bibliographical control is achieved for all publications of Australian Government agencies
 - supporting the maintenance of library deposit arrangement for all Australian Government agency publications.

All of these are relevant to the current inquiry, and explain our interest in this matter.

As you will be aware, this issue has been discussed by your Committee previously. Under our former name of FLIN (Federal Libraries Information Network) we made a submission following a similar request to your Inquiry in 1996 and, although some details have changed, the position is still similar. We advocated then, inter alia, that:

- the series is a whole of government, cost-effective service;
- government libraries provide a cost-effective means of making information about government available throughout Australian Government agencies through the series;
- access to information about government is critical to Australian democracy;
- distribution channels for government publications are not reliable; and
- the internet is no replacement for printed papers

AGLIN's position on these key points has not changed.

Potential impact of changes to the distribution of the PPS

AGLIN is particularly concerned about the tightening of eligibility guidelines to exclude government agency libraries from distribution of the papers.

Australian Government agency staff need access to information about government whenever they are at work, and they need it at their workplace. They often require urgent access to documents covering extended historical periods of time outside normal business hours to provide the accurate and reliable information to the Australian government. They can't wait for an interlibrary loan or be told that they must visit the National Library.

Government libraries do not collect in a vacuum. The purpose of their collections is to support their agencies in the development and delivery of government services. Government relies on its agencies to provide timely and accurate information, including the review of past policies and programs: the Parliamentary Papers are a vital source of that information.

The provision of Parliamentary Papers at present provides government libraries with an automatic, assured delivery of government reports that would otherwise take considerable amounts of staff time to discover and acquire.

Resource constraints within government agencies mean that library staff simply do not have the time to track down and request copies of publications from all agencies. The discovery task has become even more complex in recent years with the closure of AGPS and the cessation of *Australian Government Publications*; even with the shortcomings of both of these, they would have provided some backup for discovery purposes. The government publications website (<http://www.publications.gov.au>) has not replaced these services, is far from comprehensive and is difficult to search effectively. The Parliamentary Library's index to the series is a good discovery tool, but somewhat after the event, and still

leaves the problem of acquisition of each required item. By the time the index appears, stocks are no longer guaranteed and the time to acquire individual papers is disproportionate.

Provision of PPS in a digital format

AGLIN supports the availability of the PPS in a digital format, but only as an adjunct to the print version.

While web-based access has enhanced access to Australian Government publications for all Australians, many of the reports in the PPS are lengthy, difficult to comprehend in full online, and time-consuming and difficult to print out. Shifting the cost of obtaining a print copy is not a solution.

The bulk of papers in the series are already available on agency websites. There are, however, three problems with assuming that this is a substitute for the print series:

- they are not identified as being part of the series
- they are unlikely to be available over the long term at the same place. We refer you to the Digital Amnesia seminar sponsored by the National Library of Australia and National Archives of Australia and hosted by the ALIA earlier this year (<http://conferences.allia.org/seminars/digital.amnesia2005>) for more information
- Internet access is not always assured to agency staff when and where they need it

Activities that would improve the situation are

- Parliament hosting a website devoted to listing and providing access to the series; and
- papers being identified reliably in the Libraries Australia catalogue as belonging to the series
- a central program of preservation of digital versions of the papers

Until these are in place and have been demonstrated to provide comprehensive and reliable access over time, the print series will continue to be an essential record of government and must continue to be made available to government.

There are, doubtless, steps that could be taken to streamline and improve the service in the meantime. Some of these are:

- ensuring that only government libraries who want the papers are sent them
- a distribution system similar to the deposit libraries scheme, but with a PPS identifier added to copies
- allowing libraries to nominate the parts of the series they require, eg the whole series, annual reports only, annual reports and budget documents.
- electronic notification of new reports combined with supply/print on demand

It may be possible to introduce a subscription service for the print copies, but it should be at such a level that it does not discriminate against already poorly-resourced government libraries.

Although our primary concern is with the supply of the Parliamentary Papers series to Australian Government agency libraries, we are also concerned that public access to the series should be maintained through the state and university libraries. It is difficult to comprehend, however, that recipients of the blister packs are being offered the same service that is being withdrawn from government libraries, and we recommend that the decision be reconsidered in the light of the considerable value that the series adds to the work of government libraries.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Holden', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Kym Holden
Executive Convenor AGLIN