

Dear Members of the Productivity Commission,

I write this in anguish. At the debasement of writers in this country. This is the most despairing time to be an Australian writer for as long as I can remember, and I have been in the industry, as author and journalist, for several decades. This era is shaping up as the one where Australia's literary culture is decimated; the local publishing industry torn apart. Do you realise the long term implications for the nation's psyche, in terms of what you have proposed in your Interim Report?

Few people, apart from writers and publishers themselves, seem to realise how bleak the literary landscape has become.

Parallel Importation feels like a cyclonic storm about to hit our already fragile world. The Productivity Commission has delivered an interim report recommending Australia adopts the practice of PI. Proponents argue that removal of restrictions will cut prices. It will not. The Productivity Commission does not consider the impact of freight charges on books supplied from overseas. And as you should be aware, the price of books has already fallen over the past decade. They can go no lower if we want to sustain a vibrant, diverse and robust local industry, interested in creating national conversations - about issues close to our hearts, and telling our local stories. How cheap is too cheap, if it costs us our future stories?

One of the only countries in the world foolish enough to adopt this practice is New Zealand. Book prices are now more expensive, relatively, than in Australia. This is a fact that the Productivity Commission seems blind to. Profits in NZ are now channeled into offshore companies. Because of this, a robust and vibrant local industry has tragically shrunk. Many local publishers just don't have the money any more; some have gone bust. Publishers have been forced to cut their staff and their lists. Mid list NZ authors are finding it harder to get a book deal if their first or second book wasn't a surefire hit, and new authors are finding it harder to get on the ladder. There is no longer the means to nurture local authors through five or six books before they reach the heights, which is often the successful business model in publishing. This means NZ is losing some of its writing stars - they just can't make a living in their country.

This shortsighted move has resulted in a collapse in New Zealand's publishing

industry - it is no role model. Does Australia really want to follow suit? The US and the UK would not dream of being so shortsighted. They would never introduce this move because they want to protect their local book industry - which is a banner for their cultural success across the globe, as well as a beloved beacon of thought for the readers of their nations. Readers want a dynamic local industry - because they know that it's a conduit for their own particular voices. Introducing Parallel Importation is not the mark of a mature and confident nation, but a feeble, culturally insecure one. Do we want to be that?

The Productivity Commission Interim Report also recommends changes to copyright. We writers need clarification on this, but as it stands the recommendations would allow use of some writing without payment to copyright holders - us, the authors. It may mean Australian novels have their copyright lifted after 15 or 25 years. That's my retirement income demolished. I haven't earned Superannuation since becoming a fulltime writer; most of us writers don't. As acclaimed Australian novelist Charlotte Wood tweeted in response: "Ok I'm off to write my new novel, which I may own for max 25 years if the productivity commission has its way. [#futility](#)."

I still get royalties from my early novels, *Shiver*, *Cleave*, and *The Bride Stripped Bare*. I rely on that income to my four kids and my family get through life. I will no longer have that money coming in if the Productivity Commission has its way. Tim Winton will no longer get income from *Cloudstreet*, nor Jackie French from *Diary of a Wombat*. That feels like theft. Writing is our job. Our books are our investments in our future. We writers need urgent clarification on this vexed issue of copyright.

It's becoming ridiculously hard to earn a living as a writer. In this new, rapidly shifting, increasingly technological world of letters, of blogs and new media websites, we are expected to write for little or nothing now. The average writer's income in Australia has dropped from \$22,000 a year in the past decade - to just over \$12,900. Market forces have dictated it. Cheaper e-books have cut into publishers' profits. New players in the bookselling industry - big chain stores like Big W and Target - also offer cheaper books which means a reduced slice for the writer. Australia Council grants to individual writers and literary magazines have been cut. Adults are reading less. Print runs are being reduced, advances slashed.

Local publishers are becoming increasingly risk averse - taking punts on fewer titles, and fewer first time authors. When acclaimed writer Joan London won the Kibble Prize a few years back, she remarked, "I'll just be glad I can make a contribution to the family finances for once. There's not much money in writing."

Australian writers want to ring fence our literary heritage - enable our creators and publishers to blossom within a vibrantly local industry. Our current Prime Minister says he wants ideas and innovation - but if these recommendations go ahead, he risks unravelling the very model that rewards this creativity. As does any government that adopts these short sighted PI practices.

As for our students topping English in schools around the nation and dreaming of one day becoming part of the national conversation - of writing that Great Australian Novel - well, they're unlikely to get a book deal in a drastically shrunken local market, thanks to Parallel Importation. Or if they do, of ever making a living out of that world. It's the grim reality for most of our nation's writers, and it looks like the situation is only going to get worse. Please don't introduce these recommendations - for the nation's sake.

Thank you,

Nikki Gemmell - author