

Submission to the Productivity Commission

The last time I wrote to the Productivity Commission was in 2009, just after my first novel, *Cooee*, was published. I wrote then in protest against the Commission's recommendations concerning copyright restrictions on the parallel importation of books.

My second novel will be published in 2017. (Yes, it's sometimes a long time between drinks for writers.) My sense of *déjà vu* is acute and my sense of despair if possible even more so: I feel bewilderment and depression in the realisation that the battle has to be fought all over again. It is hard to understand the thinking behind a report which so vigorously attacks a thriving industry and therefore attacks also the community – of authors, publishers, artists, printers, publicists, agents, booksellers, festival organisers and many more – actively contributing to this industry.

Most writers don't write for money, which is just as well, because most writers never come within a bull's roar of being wealthy. Writers write out of a complex tangle of motives and imperatives and aspiration. They are artists, creators. They contribute to the culture of their country, to its intellectual and spiritual and artistic life. They don't ask for subsidies or for special treatment: they just ask to be left alone to do what they do best. Their copyright is their life's blood. How could you possibly have contemplated seizing it from them?

Apparently Senator Fifield has now indicated that the contemplated dramatic diminution of copyright is now off the agenda. But can we trust that? And, even if we can, how monumentally out of touch could the Commission have been to recommend it?

Kate Grenville famously suggested in her submission to the 2008 report that books were not like socks. It bears repeating. Books are not simple objects for retail. They are freighted with implications for the Australian psyche, for local and national culture and history, with resonances and meanings and import that ripple out in all directions.

Of course books have economic significance too, because writers are supported by an industry, and in this country we are lucky to have one of the most robust and successful book industries in the world. Like the writers it deals with, it doesn't request subsidies; it doesn't indulge in special pleading. It doesn't need to. Just as it contributes to Australian culture, it contributes to the Australian economy. As the Australian economy changes – in ways including the collapse of the mining boom, the extinguishment of the car industry and tributary businesses, the caving in of the steel industry, the deep trouble the dairy industry suddenly finds itself in – the book industry continues to chug along, meeting challenges (such as e-books and online competition) and coping with them, adjusting to changes in the marketplace, continuing to function efficiently and competitively. It emphatically ain't broke. Why would you try to fix it?

It seems inevitable that the lifting of parallel importation restrictions will diminish royalties for Australian authors. Other book markets – especially those in the United Kingdom and the United States – seem to have absolutely no intention of diluting their own copyright

protection. Why might this be the case? Is it because these countries understand the importance (economic and intellectual) of a national book industry? Is it because these countries respect the integrity of authors, the significance of copyright, the dissemination and protection of national culture, the ambitions and responsibilities of publishers?

I understand that this is a difficult and complex matter. But the more I have tried to comprehend the Commission's proposals, the more it seems to me that the consequence of accepting them will simply be devastating for me and other writers, for my publisher and other publishers. As Michael Heyward said in his article in the Guardian of 10 May, only a government that doesn't value the quality of the books Australia produces would deprive its writers of the market mechanism they need to create great stories. If this government really does want jobs and growth and innovation and agility (rather than shallow free market mantras), if it really wants an informed and well-read and educated community, if it really wants a healthy and independent industry, if it really wants Australians to tell and read Australian stories, it will refuse to adopt these damaging proposals.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to debate on this deeply important issue.

Vivienne Kelly