

Submission to

Australian Government Productivity Commission

inquiry into

Right to Repair

by

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Is it wrong to repair, or is it a right?

Introduction

A point that is missing in the draft report is that the right to repair is not just about commodities and commerce, it is also about communities, culture and sustaining innovation.

Manufacture happens primarily in distant places but repair is primarily local, whether it is through local small businesses or in the community.

Repair is commonly a matter of innovation, and is part of maintaining and fostering innovation in the community. In that way it is also an aspect of culture.

Repairing things together is particularly important in sustaining and building community because its unpredictability, the often personal value of items being repaired and the need for innovation make it difficult to price. That difficulty in costing leads to its contributing particularly strongly to the reciprocal flow of favours within a community. It brings people together who might otherwise not meet and it challenges them to think together in ways they normally may not, and ways of contributing in ways other than money alone.

A culture of repair is part of many cultures and community repair initiatives can be a powerful tool for facilitating different cultures achieving together, not just tolerating each other.

Consideration of rights to repair should include consideration of the value of repair to the workings of community.

Repair is central to culture

Assertion of a right to repair is an important aspect of putting economy back into economics and economics back into society instead of The Economy being seen as something apart from society.

Australian culture, at least until recently, cherished the abilities to repair, to reuse and to adapt things to new uses.

That extended into how things were designed and built in Australia. It was a culture of sufficiency. Of being good-enough for purpose but not flash or needlessly complex.

A culture brilliantly demonstrated in WWII with products including the Owen gun but also in 1967-68 when the Repco-Brabham racing team won the World Grand Prix Championship with an engine adapted from a mass-produced one and a car that were simply good-enough while every other team was trying to do too much.

A simple, light machine in which every aspect of engine and chassis were designed for ruggedness and reliability with ease and simplicity of manufacture, setup, maintenance and modification.

That culture, and that achievement, was intimately entwined with experience of repair, modification and maintenance. It does not happen in a vacuum.

It is a culture worth rebuilding.

A right to repair should be seen as a fundamental expression of Australian culture. We can lead the world by enshrining a right to repair in all future trade policies and treaties, as well as in design rules applied to goods sold in Australia.

Repair as innovation

Sustaining innovation is primarily about sustaining culture, not just throwing money at corporations.

Most innovation is incremental and local. A lot arises from challenges in maintaining, repairing or modifying existing products. It is largely not the product of lone inventors, or of large corporations.

Large corporations get to own Intellectual Property to a large degree through buying patent or copyrights, or through buying micro companies that have innovated new ideas.

We sustain innovation through sustaining culture and community, more than through trying to foster it only within institutes or corporations.

We have a right, and a duty, to protect innovation in Australia by protecting the right to repair in Australia.

Communities, not just commerce or commodities.

Innovating repairs together is rewarding.

When seeking commercial repair and not involved in the process, the customer's primary or only interaction is through the price paid, and they will usually seek to minimise that. If a new product is not a much higher price, the person will often simply buy new and discard devices that would actually be easy to repair.

The volume of such goods on municipal Hard Rubbish collections attest powerfully to that. Because so much is made for us, there is little opportunity for people to get together and make stuff, even less to think through how to make things, getting together to repair stuff is particularly useful. Because repairing as a group is enjoyable and rewarding in itself, the economics of it are quite different to paying someone else.

Developing skills and sharing them, educating each other and, through that, building and strengthening links across the community synergise to transform the perceived economics of Repair. Repairing things together facilitates the mixing of old and young. Many older people have valuable skills and addressing repair challenges together is a powerful means of building enduring relationships of equality, not of older people patronising young people and young people rebelling against feeling patronised.

People from other cultures are often able to share exciting other ways of repairing clothing and other materials.

Community repair ventures can also bring together disadvantaged and others across the community. That can create paths for disadvantaged people out of their plight.

With all these groups of people, working together on repairs is a wonderful way to build truly reciprocal relationships across different groups that seldom meet otherwise, and helps everyone to feel a sense of contribution and belonging that is central to general happiness and security.

Making things together, although important in building community, is not as powerful as repairing things together because it tends to happen within close groups, rather than bringing in the wider community, and it pricing is easier than for repair, so it is easier to price than repairs are. That makes for briefer and simpler transactions.

Propagating understanding through community

Building community through repairing together assists with spreading other knowledge and understanding as well as accelerating the uptake of ideas related to better use of resources, dealing with illnesses and pandemics, fighting destructive myths and distrust, such as we are seeing at present around vaccination.

Building community and repair culture can foster and sustain local businesses doing repairs. When people understand more about repair, they are more able to trust a competent person to do repairs for them when they cannot spare the time themselves.

Repairing stuff together is an important element of building and sustaining resilient communities. Making stuff together does not work quite as well because making stuff is more simply valued, in money or other terms. It is precisely the difficulty of pricing the innovation of repair that makes it ideal as the vehicle for the reciprocal flow of favours that build the strength and resiliency of communities.

That resiliency has been found wanting in the COVID pandemic, and there is no assurance that we will not have other, perhaps greater, crises to face in future, cut off from normal supply and other networks through quarantine restrictions, fire or flood.

Repair fosters better recycling

Even where things cannot be repaired, dismantling and other higher-quality recycling is more manageable at community level than at home.

Those who repair things are more conscious of the materials of which things are made, so they can contribute to more-economical recycling.

Recycling is more-efficient when different materials can be kept apart. "Co-mingled" recycling is a last resort, a way of coping with most people's ignorance of recycling, not the best way of doing things.

Design to defeat repair

But such efforts are increasingly frustrated by devices designed to thwart repair, or even effective recycling.

Not only through physical design but also through abuse of intellectual property law to protect monopolistic business practices.

Copyright and patenting were introduced to protect authors and artisans. To give them protection from competition for a limited period so they could recoup the costs of development of their ideas. Yet increasingly those Intellectual Property laws are being used against authors and artisans, by huge multi-national corporations.

Summary

The terms of reference of the inquiry are narrow, and perhaps feed towards misconception, or even to preconceived conclusions.

Establishing a right to repair is a central aspect of building a better future through contributing to sustaining community and innovation.

Not only through sparing resources needed for new products, or for supporting business, but in sustaining community, culture and innovation.

Protecting a right to repair is part of building and sustaining a strong and resourceful Australia.