

AN AUTHOR'S SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION

The following is a response to the Productivity Commission's intention to reduce or dilute the protection afforded to Australian Publishers by the Parallel Importation Restrictions Act.

The main impetus behind this intention appears to be a claim that removal of current protections will lower book prices for some distributors and therefore make books more affordable to the masses. It's a valid claim in so much prices across the board may fall a little if the industry was exposed to international competition, but I wish to point out that sales would probably not increase much, if at all. Yet the consequences for opening up the market could bury Australian literature as local publishers would be forced to narrow the production base of local titles. My submission will be an attempt to prove the point beyond any doubt.

Firstly, the price of books in Australia has nothing to do with declining sales and the closing down of bookshops. It is simply a cultural shift currently sweeping this country. On a promotion tour last August I discovered the mining boom in the Queensland cities of Gladstone and Rockhampton had caused an extraordinary shift in culture from conservative to Ultra modern living. The bookshop in Gladstone (pop 50,000) had just closed when I arrived. Equally disturbing was that the newsagents provided no retail outlet for books. If you wanted a book you drove 100km to Rockhampton (pop 100,000), where there was one bookshop open and another about to close its doors. I would suggest that the city of Gladstone is the only city in the western world, with a population above 30,000, with no bookshop. The disturbing fact is proof enough that a simple pragmatic solution may do more harm than good. These sobering statistics have nothing to do with affordability. The new houses, the cars, the prolific number of bottleshops, all indicate that Queensland mining cities are among the most affluent in the world.

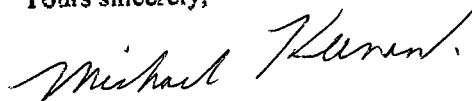
I note that the Commission has insufficient data to fully describe and analyse the book market. This is a disturbing admission in view of what is proposed. For what it's worth I can analyse the Australian book market quite well on solid anecdotal evidence. My titles sell from Broome to Melbourne and Perth to Mareeba in North Queensland. Having attended more than sixty literary functions in the past two years, I know what people are buying in each given region within the trade section i.e., non-fiction, novels, historic, biography, food and travel. I find it interesting that the sale figures of my titles in Broome are staggering for a low profile author, yet in the Melbourne CBD the same titles would be indeed scarce. It is extremely important for the Commission to know what people are buying in given regions, and in what volumes.

The browsing book buyer in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane will seek the same titles as do the book shoppers in New York and London. Predominantly overseas titles are sourced, including travel, health and biographies of well known identities. I've been into bookshops with no Australian titles except maybe Tim Winton. In Adelaide and Perth the selection of literature tends to be more traditional and in the provincial cities the demand for Australian literature remains strong. Bill Bryson's book---"The Lost Continent." (basically American contemporary culture beyond the major cities), has an accidental affinity with Australia's inland culture. Whilst the metaphor of the title does

not apply to Australia, exactly the same sphere of vision within provincial inland Australia applies. That is people don't travel much outside Australia and a great many never leave Australian shores. They are focused on the local culture and that's all they want to read about. The number of people, particularly men, who refuse to read any fiction is a serious revelation, because this is the market that's most threatened if Australian publishers are forced to become little more than warehouses. The market for Australian non-fiction may also be much larger than many people give credit. I have filled the library function room at Albury and have on some occasions signed books for up two hours non-stop, but in provincial cities such statistics never flow through to the major newspapers which each week publish the bestseller lists, sourced from local retail outlets.

I believe the current P.I.R. laws should not be tampered with. The evidence for an improved industry by weakening these laws is not based on sound data and if the powers to be get it wrong, Australian Literature may never recover. The proposals amount to an unacceptable risk.

Yours sincerely,



Michael Keenan.
(Australian non-fiction Author)