

LETTERS

Cautious View

Dear Editor,

The official view of ALIA on the question of book prices in Australia, as expanded by Derek Whitehead, is indeed cautious. Whether it represents the view of the membership at large is, of course, questionable. One may presume that there is a wide spectrum, from the ultra conservative attitude being promoted by Derek Fielding, to the radical which I personally espouse.

The reality is that overseas published books are grossly over-priced in Australia as any world traveller knows. Our overseas visitors to Sydney in 1988 were appalled at the prices in our bookshops. A recent survey of book prices in Perth, conducted by Curtin University Library Studies students, under the supervision of Andy Exon and myself, revealed an average discrepancy between the price in the country of origin and the local price of 51.81 per cent, over a sample of 512 books, over all major DC classes. In fact 55 per cent of the sample had a positive discrepancy of over 50 per cent, while nearly 20 per cent exhibited a 100 per cent or more markup! The worst single case was 950 per cent above the published price!

If this data is reasonably representative, and I believe it is, and perhaps even understates the extent of high prices, it needs much more justification than the highly questionable arguments being promoted by the ABPA, and supported by Derek Fielding. While this problem does not seriously affect large libraries, as librarians we should all be concerned about the availability and affordability of books to the individual Australians who want to buy books. Moreover, if local prices for overseas published books were generally competitive with the terms offered by library suppliers, it is likely that at least some of the purchases of large libraries would be directed to Australian booksellers, to their advantage; to the advantage of the book buying public, in that local book shops would become more profitable; and even to the national economy.

I find it difficult to comprehend the arguments that opening the market (as the PSA recommends) will have a deleterious effect upon local publishers, bookshops or libraries. Local publishers are not protected either by the Copyright Act or by the closed market, and neither have anything to do with the

ability of Australian publishers to distribute overseas. It appears that Derek Fielding, and perhaps others, believe that by keeping overseas published books out of our bookshops, or by pricing them out of the reach of the average Australian, sales of Australian authors published in Australia are being encouraged. If this were so, it would be deplorable, but perhaps the belief only existed in the narrowly protectionist environment of fortress Queensland? It is of course, nonsense to suggest that a locally published edition of a living Australian author could be legally undercut by a cheap overseas published edition, unless the owner of the copyright agreed to it.

There does in fact appear to be considerable confusion, possibly purposely generated, about the impacts of the closed/open market on booksellers, publishers, and authors. There is no doubt in my mind that booksellers, and thence the public will be better placed if the market is opened completely. I do not accept that authors will be worse off - in most cases they couldn't be - and in any case their problems need to be addressed in quite different contexts. And as to publishers, despite Fielding's claim, it is common knowledge that the Australian scene is dominated by overseas, multi-national companies. What happened to A & R, Jacaranda etc., will continue to happen to any moderately successful indigenous commercial publisher, unless some controls are introduced specifically to protect Australian owned operations from foreign takeovers - and this is not restricted to publishing.

The incredible anomaly of Fielding's support for the protectionist effects of the Copyright Act and the closed market, is that they protect the wrong companies. I am sure that if the government proposed a 50 per cent import duty on books, Derek Fielding, and all of ALIA, would leap up in protest. Why then should a 50 per cent levy imposed by the overseas publishers be not only acceptable, but, so it is claimed, beneficial to the Australian literary world?

GG Allen
University Librarian
Curtin University
of Technology

Libraries are for everyone

A world first in library promotion

Victoria's public libraries have initiated a world first in library promotion and a unique promotion of a local government service with the Library Tram.

The Library Tram is the result of the Transporting Art-Thematic Tram Program developed by the Ministry for the Arts and the Ministry of Transport. The Program, open to State and Local Governments or their nominees, provides for an artistic representation of specific themes on Melbourne's Trams. The first theme tram was the 1987 Spoleto Tram, followed by the Bicentennial Tram and the Jiangsu Province Tram (the Panda Tram) in 1988. 1989 was the first year general submissions for the Program were sought. The Library submission was one of five selected from twelve nominations.

The Library Tram submission was developed and prepared by the Victorian Public Library Expo Association (VPLEA) and supported by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the Library Promotion Committee of Victoria (LPCV).

The cost of participation in the Thematic Tram Program is \$8500. Sue Noble, Coordinator of the Library Tram Project said:

'When we took on this project we realised that fundraising would be a major concern. After all this was an innovative project outside the normal range of promotional activities allowed for in library budgets. Nonetheless, sponsorship has been received from diverse sources within the library industry, for example the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV), Survival of Libraries in Victoria (SOLV), individual public, academic and special libraries, and the State Library of Victoria.

Publishing packages and pressures

Book prices and new book importing arrangements

There has been an opinion prevalent in Australia for many years that the prices of some imported books have been excessive by comparison with the cost of the same books overseas, partly to take advantage of cheaper overseas prices but also because many books

simply have not been published in Australia. In this sense publishing means making a book available to the public. The book does not have to be made in Australia.

Unlike libraries and private individuals, booksellers have been prevented by the Copyright Act from importing copies directly from overseas. They have been compelled to purchase overseas books from the owner of the Australian copyright. In effect this has meant that the Australian copyright owner has had a monopoly and can set whatever price the market will bear

without fear of competition for that particular book. Of course there is competition where another title may be just as acceptable to the reader, as with many novels and other popular lines.

Further frustration has been caused by long delays between when a book has been published overseas and when it has come onto the Australian market. Readers of book reviews of the overseas edition seek particular titles from booksellers, only to be told that the book concerned is not yet available in Australia. In many cases it may never be published in Australia.

Particularly galling has been the fact that Australian market rights have traditionally been part of a package of British and Commonwealth market rights. The American edition could not be sold in Australia yet the British publisher might take a long time to publish an Australian edition or never publish it at all.

These concerns led the Attorney-General, some years ago, to ask the Copyright Law Review Committee (CLRC) to consider whether changes should be made to the relevant sections of the Copyright Act. The reference covered not only books but all copyright materials, such as recordings, films, computer software.

After taking a lot of evidence and holding public hearings the committee made recommendations to relax the importation provisions of the Act in ways that would ease the problem of availability. It told the Attorney-General that it did not have the necessary powers to enquire authoritatively into prices and suggested that this might be done by a body explicitly empowered to do so.

The Government then asked the Prices Surveillance Authority (PSA) to hold an inquiry into book prices and its final report was issued in December last. The PSA recommended that the copyright restrictions on the importation of non-pirate copies should be removed except in the case of books by Australian authors published in Australia.

The Government has decided not to go as far as the PSA recommended. Instead it has broadly accepted the recommendations of the CLRC interpreting them in a way which will place heavy pressure on copyright owners to publish in Australia quickly and to keep their books available.

Under the new policy copyright owners will in future lose their monopoly if a book is not published in

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'The disappointing aspect of our fundraising campaign has been the insular view displayed by some sections of the library industry which have been unable to see the relevance of promoting what is after all a multi-million dollar national information network. This means we haven't received the financial support we expected and we have fallen short of our fundraising target. Sponsors are still being sought.

'Even though it is metropolitan based, the Library Tram has already received state-wide attention and will be promoted nationally and internationally.

'The design of the Library Tram was selected from three original con-

cepts developed by young Victorian artists. The winning entry by Andrea Cameron, a final year Graphic Design student from the Prahran campus of Victorian College, was a well executed response to the brief. The theme for the Library Tram is Libraries are for Everyone.'

For the next 12 months the Library Tram will continue to operate along Melbourne's tram routes. Currently it is operating from the Brunswick depot along the Sydney Road - Royal Parade - Elizabeth Street route.

Enquiries about the Library Tram project are welcomed. Please contact Sue Noble at Camberwell City Libraries on (03) 811 0390.

Sue Noble
Chairperson
Victorian Public
Library Expo Association



Victoria's Library Tram - a world first.

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