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If there existed a measure of the number of committees per square kilometre, the Australian Capital Territory would have to have the highest density in the country. Committees underpin the business of this town especially given the parliamentary, bureaucratic and national association presence. Senator Gareth Evans has said that his favourite description of a committee is a 'cul de sac into which good ideas are lured and quietly strangled'. Frustrated by his hard work on one particular Senate committee, Gareth Evans was moved to describe himself and his committee colleagues as the 'Portnoys of the parliamentary system, engaged endlessly in activity which is only marginally satisfying, very tiring and thoroughly unconstructive' (Senate, *Hansard*, 2 April 1980, p 1362).

While there have been many critics of the parliamentary committee system over the years, there is a general belief that these committees can provide an excellent opportunity for community input to the public policy decision-making process. They are also an important mechanism for the scrutiny of the operations of executive government. From time to time a parliamentary committee will undertake an inquiry into a matter of direct concern to the library and information profession. When these take place our Association prepares a submission and will often appear before the committee to support the case it has made and to answer questions about specific issues.

The Australian Senate's Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training is conducting an inquiry into the organisation and funding of research in higher education. ALIA, together with ACLIS and CAUL, provided the Committee with a submission which addressed issues such as the decline in library resources, the inadequacy of library funding from research grants, the Distributed National Collection, the continuing need for funding of national research datasets and electronic networks. This submission was

supported by, and expanded upon by, oral presentations by the Vice President of ALIA, Bill Linklater, and the University Librarian at the ANU, Colin Steele, at the committee's hearing in Canberra on 22 October.

The Committee was particularly interested in the issue of the additional library resource implications of many research applications and research funding decisions. Indeed the Australian Research Council (ARC) was the subject of broad criticism from the committee during the hearings most particularly in relation to its perceived poor administrative performance. Our submission included the argument that there was a need on the part of individual researchers, university administrations and funding bodies such as the ARC to acknowledge the library resource implications of research proposals and to fund them accordingly.

The Committee's interest in the decline in the purchase of serials had earlier been the subject of a press release by committee member, Senator Dr John Tierney, who 'condemned the government for their ten years of neglect of libraries in the higher education sector'. The Committee sought details of the extent of the decline in the purchase of library materials and the long term impact of this. Our submission called for supplementary funds from the Department of Employment, Education and Training to universities, to be directed to their libraries, which would allow a steady program of acquisitions.

It was in the area of electronic networks that we were able to provide detailed advice to the Committee. Our submission explained the potential for AARNet to substantially change the ways in which researchers create, communicate and disseminate knowledge. Reference was made to the 'Libraries at the AARNet Crossroads' report which makes the point that the pace of innovation in providing the tools and information required to create this new information environment has been dramatic, yet the policy framework has

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been slow to respond. The report identifies the need for quality control, user training documentation, and structured access to the distributed electronic information services.

Bill Linklater advised the Committee that a proposal for the establishment of an Australian National Information Centre is being considered by the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee which, if implemented would provide for quality control on the network and the basis for a much greater degree of access—beyond higher education—to the community. He further advised the Committee of the desirability of this democratisation of access to national and international networks and the benefits to the research community of data becoming available through public library and local government data files, community organisations, etc.

The participation of our Association in inquiries of relevance to the library and information profession sends important signals to Parliament. The committee system in Parliament is fundamental to the public policy making process. Our interest in issues of concern to our members, and our suggestions for reform which can be expressed in these Parliamentary committees, continue to ensure that ALIA has a high public profile.

The report of the Senate Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training inquiry into the organisation and funding of research in higher education is to be published in March 1994. It would appear from the knowledge, interest and diligence displayed by this Committee and its support staff that there is little risk that it will suffer the self-indulgent but pointless state described by Senator Evans. It should be noted however that our appearance occurred early on a morning when the Senate had sat into the wee hours and there was thus some indication of extreme tiredness on the part of the Committee members. But they could be forgiven. Earlier that morning they had, eventually, passed the budget. ■