

Proposed leasing of AGPS bookshops

THE FOLLOWING LETTER, stating the Library Association of Australia's concern over the proposed leasing of the AGPS Bookshops to the private sector, was sent by the LAA's President, Jim Dywer, on 7 May 1981 to the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser; Sir Phillip Lynch (Minister for Industry and Commerce); the Hon Kevin Newman (Minister for Administrative Services) and Senator John Button (Leader of the Opposition in the Senate).

The President's letter reads:
 'Recently the Commonwealth Government announced various measures aimed at reducing Government expenditure and strengthening private economic activity. One such measure is to offer the Australian Government Publishing Service Bookshops for lease to the private sector.

'Some aspects of that proposal are viewed with concern by the Library Association of Australia. In particular these centre on the effect that transfer will have on the price and the accessibility of material.

'The Association is conscious of the tight pricing mechanism currently used by AGPS (which I understand to be approximately four times the run-on cost) to reach a break-even point in the sale of publications. It is evident that if these ventures are to be leased to a commercial enterprise it would wish to establish a profitable system. The inevitable result will be a substantial price rise for government publications.

'The AGPS is seen as a major information source and a vital link in access to Government information. It is in the interests of neither the Government nor the community if access to Government policy is restricted by price escalation. I would emphasise the importance of the Government making known its activities and reports. Likewise I would emphasise the importance of the policies of Government being understood by the wider community.

'May I on behalf of the Library Association of Australia draw these concerns to your attention in the anticipation that careful consideration will be given to the implications of the proposal to lease the Australian Government Publishing Service Bookshops to the private sector'.

The reply from the Hon Kevin Newman reads,

in part: '... Mr Fraser has asked me to reply to you on his behalf.

'Since I appreciate the concern of your Association that the leasing arrangements might have an adverse effect on the operation of the Bookshops, I should like you to know that it is the Government's intention to ensure that the quality of service is not impaired, and that the full range of Government publications will continue to be available.

'Concerning the prices of publications under the leasing arrangements, the Publishing Service of course has no power to dictate retail prices to booksellers, so it is possible that some lessees might increase the prices of some publications. It is not expected that this practice will be significant or widespread, however, and in any case it will be open to the public to obtain publications by mail order from the Publishing Service at regular prices.

'Your Association can be assured that when

prospective lessees are being considered all relevant matters will be taken into account to ensure that an adequate and equitable service is provided'.

Senator John Button's reply states: '... I read with interest your thoughtful letter on this subject and it confirmed my own suspicions about what is likely to happen. Not only does it seem to me to be important that Government publications be as widely available as possible, at as reasonable price as possible, there does seem to be something involved in relation to integrity of the Government Publishing Service and a need for distribution of its own publications to be in its hands.

'I am opposed to the proposal of the Ministerial Review Committee but am fortified in my opposition on this particular issue by the comments made in your letter. Like many decisions of the Razor Gang it is a short term and short sighted decision'.

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