

Fifteen-second sound bite



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In February the Association was invited to give evidence before the Senate employment, workplace relations, small business and education committee hearing on its reference: GST — a New Tax System Inquiry. Craig Anderson and I attended, it being fortuitous that our president is also the manager of the library system on which the modelling in our submission was based.

The line of questioning by Senators was very much focussed on the issue of books being exempted from the GST. The Australian Democrats has the policy position that books should be excluded from the GST and issued a press release on the morning of the hearing announcing that they would be pursuing this position with the Association.

The case for a GST exemption for books is well-argued in submissions to the Inquiry by the Australian Publishers Association, the Printing Industries Association, the Australian Booksellers Association and the Australian Society of Authors. The Association supports an exemption on books and serials, within our wide-ranging submission.

The matter of definition of 'books and serials' is of interest to the Committee, regardless of political affiliation. If 'books and serials' are to be exempted, then what is to be included in that definition? If all books and serials were to be GST exempt is it appropriate then that the fashion, hobby and gossip magazines for example be treated in the same way as academic journals? What may be educational in one context and to some readers may be entertainment to others. What about other resources such as videos, and CD-ROMs? The Association has responded on this matter in relation to libraries and provided the example of the Canadian exemption for libraries and schools based on a rebate of one hundred per cent of the GST on purchases of books and those periodicals bought by subscription and containing five per cent advertising or less.

What the Senators were really seeking was some modelling or evidence of the impact on the GST on employment, of books (and serials) being exempted. This is not information that the Association can or should be able to provide in this instance and in response referred the committee to the modelling provided by the Australian Publishers and the Printing Industries Associations.

Craig and I followed the McDonald's team in giving evidence, and no free chips for guessing which of the eleven organisations appearing that day grabbed the media attention. Warnings of job losses of 7000 (mostly young people) across the food services sector if food services are taxed, or 21 000 if food is taxed in restaurants and cafés but is exempt in supermarkets, are compelling.

The whole GST Inquiry is a timely reminder of the impact of using statistics, modelling and catchwords effectively. We are only too aware that information provided for impact needs to be able to be packaged in concise, and if necessary exploitative, 'grabs' — fifteen-second sound bites if it is for the electronic media. I well remember one of my public policy lecturers exhorting us to apply the ACA (A Current Affair) test to our policy development. The cold reality is that politicians, government and the media take more notice of the media-savvy 'grabs' from the McDonald's evidence than they do of the moral or ethical claim that a GST on books is a tax on learning or reading, even though the latter claim is just as valid.

A great deal has been achieved over the last few years in raising the profile of our sector. To continue to do this, and to be even more effective in lobbying for and promoting our sector, the Association must apply the extensive information skills available to it to develop resources that can substantiate and illustrate our claims. There are a number of things we can do.

The most critical are on our shortlist:

- compile sources of relevant statistics and survey results;
- compile sources of modelling relevant to the sector;
- secure access to and use of these sources;
- commission research or modelling — the ACIRRT workplace survey has been invaluable;
- produce promotional materials, such as 'quotable facts'.

Did you know there are more public libraries in New South Wales than McDonald's restaurants? The latest *Annual Public Library Statistical Return* proves it. ■

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