

The print media inquiry

Michael Lee, MP, discusses the terms of reference of the inquiry, its timing,

predecessors and issues considered in its first hearings

On 22 August 1991 the House of Representatives carried a resolution establishing a Select Committee to investigate the Australian print media.

The Committee's terms of reference are to report on:

- (a) structural factors in the print media industry inhibiting competition between publications, including ownership, production (including paper supply) and distribution arrangements;
- (b) the print media's distribution and information gathering arrangements;
- (c) the extent to which the ownership or control of various sectors of the print media industry provide a barrier to entry by competitive alternatives;
- (d) the adequacy of current Commonwealth legislation and practice to foster competition and diversity of ownership in the print media; and
- (e) the practicability of editorial independence between proprietors and journalists.

Timing

The committee is required to invite public submissions, conduct public hearings and report back to Parliament before 19 December.

Some observers have already expressed doubts that our committee can conduct a thorough investigation of the many important issues that fall within our terms of reference in the time available.

As the Chairman of the Print Media Committee, I am the first to concede that we will have a difficult task in meeting the deadline set by the Parliament. If the committee believes more time is needed to complete the task, I am confident that an extension would be granted. However, any delay in tabling this report may result in the government being unable to implement any proposed legislative reforms before the middle of 1992.

A few commentators have expressed a preference for a royal commission into the print media. Unfortunately, royal commissions into the print media do not have a great record of achieving success.

In Britain since the second world war, there have been three royal commissions on the print media, some running for several years and costing large sums of money. Many of their most important recommendations were not implemented by governments.

In Canada, the Kent Royal Commission recommended that limitations be placed on newspaper ownership and tax incentives be used to improve the quality of newspapers and to encourage greater use of Canadian editorial content.

When a minister in the Trudeau Government sought to introduce a watered-down reform package, a campaign conducted by Canadian newspapers resulted in the minister being dumped. However, cross media ownership rules were introduced.

In Victoria, the Norris Inquiry established by the Hamer Government in 1981, recommended that a Tribunal be established to examine transactions in newspaper shares to prevent any further concentration of newspaper ownership. However, the Thompson and Cain Government did not establish the Tribunal.

Parliamentary reports

While judicial inquiries into the print media may have had limited success, it is also fair for our critics to point out that many parliamentary reports have been pigeon holed, after failing to find favour with the government of the day.

The Print Media Inquiry report may suffer a similar fate.

Their terms of reference are wide ranging and I expect that we will be making a large number of recommendations.

Ultimately of course, the government and the parliament will have to decide which of our recommendations should be accepted.

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However, given the strategic importance of the John Fairfax Group to the Australian print media, we requested each of the Fairfax bidders to appear in the first week of public hearings.

Each bidder lodged a submission and answered questions for than two hours on issues such as the structure of the bids, whether parts of the group would be sold off, whether separate news bureaus would be maintained and their views on editorial independence.

Opinions were also expressed about government limitations on foreign investment in newspapers and cross media ownership rules.

Professor Fels from the Trade Practices Commission also appeared in the first week, arguing that the threshold for the Merger Test should be lowered from 'dominance' to 'a substantial lessening of competition' for all industries not just the print media.

The Australian Journalists Association called for government imposed limits on the number of major metropolitan daily newspapers which any company should be allowed to own, with exemptions for new publications and for those whose economic viability would be threatened by the limits.

Representatives of News Limited argued that they compete with Fairfax, magazines, radio and television for advertising and for news items. They also argued that newspapers within the company competed with each other and that editors were given freedom to 'spin in their own orbit'.

Groups such as The Age Independence Committee, Friends of Fairfax, the Communications Law Centre and the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism answered questions on charters of editorial independence and what influence proprietors and newspaper management should have on the content of newspapers.

Each member of the committee will need to determine which issues he or she believes are the most important.

Michael Lee is a Labor MP and Chairman of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Print Media.