

AUSTLII MEDIA RELEASE



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Australasian Legal Information Institute

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ACROSS TIME AND JURISDICTIONS: THE AUSTRALIAN ROYAL COMMISSIONS AND PUBLIC INQUIRIES LIBRARY

Among the most important public documents in Australia, since the nineteenth century formation of the Australasian colonies, are the reports of royal commissions and other executive or legislatively mandated public inquiries, select committees of parliament, and other quasi-legislative or judicial inquisitorial bodies. These documents provide essential context to legislative and judicial developments over time. Together with the reports of Law Reform Commissions, they are often the best source for finding contributions to law reform by industry and interest groups, analysis of the operation of current laws, and well-considered recommendations for law reform. Public inquiries are a trusted mechanism for the investigation of allegations of wrongdoing and maladministration and for the provision of independent policy advice to the executive. They are an essential element of the Australian historical record, providing a valuable resource for researchers in the areas of law, history, politics and public policy. Until the late twentieth century the reports of royal commissions were only made available as selectively issued paper reports included in tabled parliamentary papers, which are of limited accessibility, and were not available online. More recently commissions have established their own websites and publish extensively using this means. However, once the commission has reported, the ongoing maintenance of the website and the material it contains is at some risk and may well be less discoverable, or in some cases not at all. Most earlier reports have not been digitised at all and are thus not available online.

To address these problems, in 2021 AustLII (via its host universities UNSW and UTS) together with ten partner universities (Sydney, Melbourne, Monash, Deakin, Queensland, Adelaide, Curtin, UWA, ANU and UNE) was awarded Australian Research Council (ARC) funding to support the development of a new facility on AustLII to be called the 'Australian Royal Commissions and Public Inquiries Library'. The project was guided by 15 Chief Investigators from the partner universities.

The Library provides comprehensive free access online to the reports of all royal commissions and other public inquiries held in Australia since colonial times, and adds to AustLII new databases containing the reports of 3,968 Royal Commissions and Public Inquiries from the Commonwealth and all states and territories, from the mid-nineteenth century. AustLII was able to locate, digitise and make available 94% of all the reports that it could identify and includes:

- 1,728 Documents of the Reports of Royal Commissions
- 1,185 Documents of the Reports of Boards and Commissions of Public Inquiry
- 2,655 Documents of the Reports of Parliamentary Select Committees of Public Inquiry

Overall, this project has resulted in the addition to AustLII of 5,551 documents and over 527,000 new pages.

The Library was launched on 23 August 2023 by the Hon. Mark Dreyfus KC MP, Attorney-General of Australia, and is now available for free access to all at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/royalc/>. In his launch speech, the Attorney-General said:

"The Royal Commissions and Public Inquiries Library will contain the entire, unbroken history of public inquiries in Australia which, in turn, reveals much about our progress and our values as a nation. This library will serve as an important public record of the work of royal commissions and other public inquiries in this country. It will be an incredibly useful resource for all who take an interest in Australian government and history, and AustLII is to be congratulated for making such a great resource accessible to the entire community."

AustLII publishes nearly 1,000 Australasian legal databases including current and historical case law, legislation, law reform reports, law journals and the largest national treaties collection on the Internet. AustLII receives about 700,000 accesses per day, and is regularly rated as Australia's most used legal website. Since its inception AustLII has provided free access for the Australian public to the essential legal information needed for the rule of law and democracy to function effectively. AustLII's broad public policy agenda is to improve access to justice through better access to information.

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