

303

NATIONAL BOOK COUNCIL

ANNUAL REPORT 1981

A YEAR OF DIFFICULTY AND ACHIEVEMENT

The Hon. Mr. Justice M.D. Kirby
President of the National Book Council of Australia

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The year past was one in which the National Book Council and all those involved in books in Australia faced new difficulties. But it was also one in which there were refreshing achievements. Institutions, like people, are tested by difficulties. They take encouragement from achievement.

Book House : an Exhilarating Project

First the good news. Probably the happiest occasion of the year was the opening by the Honourable Norman Lacy MP, Victorian Minister for the Arts, of Book House, Melbourne on 8 December 1981. Mr. Lacy was introduced to a representative cross section of people involved in the world of books in Australia by our Chairman, Dr. Stephen Murray-Smith. Without the support of the Victorian Government, and the interest of the Minister, this novel enterprise would not have been possible. Mr. Lacy was a minister of religion, before he became a Minister of the Crown in 1979. The precedents for this transfer were not auspicious, St. Thomas a'Becket and Cardinal Wolsey being two precursors who sprang to my mind. But there is no doubt that the Minister has used his public office to good effect in ensuring support (including financial support) for the establishment of Book House in Melbourne. He has taken a special interest in the problem of illiteracy and the remedial teaching of English. In his department, he is known as the 'Minister for Reading'. Personally, I can think of no prouder title for an Australian Minister to hold.

Book House is a monument to the bold spirits of the National Book Council and the book industry of Australia. When first mooted, it attracted concern about the financial strains it would impose on the Council. But the opportunity of providing a venue to bring together writers, publishers, sellers and readers of books was so exhilarating, that the project captured the imagination of those who could do something about it.

The establishment of Book House, with government support, is even more remarkable in the age of Milton Friedman, the Razor Gang and budgetary restraint. It provides a headquarters for the book in Victoria. The human mind loves a precedent. Book House provides an example to other States throughout Australia of what can be done, at relatively little cost, to bring together those who rejoice in membership of the world of books.

Since Book House was opened, within the space of just a few weeks, it has been used by the National Book Council Executive Committee, the National Book Council Victorian Committee, the Australian Book Review Editorial Board, the Book House Management Committee, the Promotions Committee, the Children's Book Council, the Society of Editors, the Australian Library Promotion Council, the Australian Booksellers' Association (Victoria), the Australian Book Publishers' Association, the 'Please Don't Tax Books' Campaign Committee and many other groups. Distinguished visitors from the constituent members of the National Book Council have come to Book House and used its facilities. So have leaders in various Australian bodies concerned with books. The Director-General of the National Library of Australia (Mr. Harrison Bryan), the Immediate Past President of the Library Association (Mr. Dennis Richardson) and Dr. Frank Forster of the Book Collectors' Society are just a few of the distinguished visitors. In time, their name will be legion. But it is the hope of the Council that it will not just be men and women of letters who will find Book House a congenial place to meet. Ordinary citizens who love books and who are interested to promote the ready availability and use of books throughout Australia (and beyond) will always be welcome at Book House. It is my hope that, without too much delay, there will be a Book House in other leading centres of our country.

A Glittering Literary Dinner

The Eighth Annual Literary Dinner on 9 October 1981 was a glittering affair. In the semi colonial setting of the University and Schools Club in Sydney, on a hot October evening, a distinguished sampling of authors, publishers, booksellers and others heard a brilliant speech by Professor Geoffrey Blainey. Professor Blaney spoke of the symbols of Australian nationalism, particularly the Southern Cross. His speech was a literary event of its own. One notable feature of the dinner was the gathering together of all of the Chairmen of the Literature Board since its establishment, save for Nancy Keesing (Chairman of the NSW Committee of the National Book Council) who was unfortunately ill. If she had been present, the occasion would have been the first on which all of the Chairmen of the Literature Board since its establishment had met together in the one place : Geoffrey Blainey, Nancy Keesing, Alan Brissenden and the present director, Dr. Michael Cosstigan.

Soon after the dinner, the indefatigable Executive Director of the National Book Council, Stewart Edwards, attended, as an honoured guest, the Frankfurt Book Fair in the Federal Republic of Germany. This was a deserved compliment to Stewart Edwards. But it was also a compliment to the National Book Council and to the profession and industry of books in Australia. A great deal of interest was expressed in Germany about Australian books. We must take to the four corners of the world the message that our country is more than an efficient producer of primary products and rich resource of minerals. Our intellectual treasures are now winning world renown.

The Proposed Tax on Books

Now, as they say, the bad news. In August 1981 the Federal Treasurer, Mr. Howard, presented the Budget for 1981-2 to the Australian Parliament. One paragraph of his speech announced the proposal of the Government to introduce legislation to tax, at a rate of two and a half percent, a range of goods long exempt. Amongst these goods, proposed for taxation, were 'books, magazines and newspapers'. Within days of the Minister's announcement, national and international opinion had been mobilised against the proposal. The President of the International Booksellers' Federation, Mr. Michael Zifcak, a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, described the 'shock waves through the Australian book community' which the Budget had set in train. 'Backward, barbaric and shameful' were the adjectives he used. The International Book Committee of UNESCO cabled its protest to the Prime Minister from Washington. The International Bookseller's Federation at Frankfurt also sent a cable. Numerous and loud were the protests of Australian authors, booksellers, representative organisations and distinguished citizens.

On 20 October 1981, the Australian Senate voted to press the House of Representatives to exempt 'necessities', including books, magazines and newspapers, from the proposed sales tax. There the debate rests at the time of this report.

The National Book Council was active in the public campaign to seek to dissuade the Government from the proposed tax, to rally public opinion and to secure the opposition of other political parties. The record of this effort, which is virtually unique, is to be found in a book published in November 1981 by the National Book Council for the Please Don't Tax Books Committee. The book, 'Please Don't Tax Books', rehearses the history of arguments and media comments concerning the campaign. There is little doubt that more will be heard on this topic in the year to come. The National Book Council has played a useful and constructive part as a focus for the concern and action of all those involved with books who seek the reversal of the planned tax. There is nothing pernicious

in the campaign. It is a legitimate exercise of democratic rights addressed to the Australian Parliament and people. It illustrates the value of a body such as the National Press Council which can bring together, in a common cause, the many diverse interests of the Australian world of books. As the role and importance of government shows little sign of retreating, it is likely that this function of the National Book Council will increase rather than recede in the years ahead.

A Year of Achievement

On balance, it has been a year of achievement. It is the first full year of my Presidency. I want to pay tribute to my most distinguished predecessor Professor Manning Clark AC who started 1981 by being named Australian of the Year and completed it with the publication of the latest volume of his history of Australia, The People Make Laws. His contribution to the National Book Council in its establishment and his indefatigable example as an author and publicist of ideas provide an inspiration to all who love the written word.

The Australian Book Review continues to be published to a uniformly high standard. The annual prizes for Australian literature continue to attract entrants of high calibre. Participants in the National Book Council, its Governing Council and its State Committees continue to exhibit enthusiasm, imagination and dedication to the cause of books. Important initiatives lie ahead. To those who express satisfaction with the year past, I can only say, in the words of the immortal American comic, 'You ain't seen nothin' yet'.

MICHAEL KIRBY

8 January 1982