

"Libraries Need Friends"

Friends of Libraries Australia

Launch of the Friends State Library

Melbourne Victoria 9 December 1994.

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FRIENDS OF LIBRARIES AUSTRALIA

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STATE LIBRARY MELBOURNE VICTORIA 9 DECEMBER 1994

LIBRARIES NEED FRIENDS

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Patron of Friends of Libraries Australia

PRIVATISATION - TEN YEARS ON

It is nearly ten years since I addressed the opening of Australian Library Week in Hobart and spoke to the theme "Libraries and the end of the New Feudalism". In my address, I traced the growth of the free library in Australia. In many parts of our country it grew out of a benevolent attitude of the early colonial administrators. When their benevolent institutions fell upon hard times, citizens organised free local libraries. Many of these were eventually supported by local government authorities. In due course, statutes were enacted to promise large sections of the community free access to public libraries. In a sense, this was a reflection of the same great movement, of the latter part of the 19th

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century, which promised education for all at school: secular, compulsory and free.

These moves in Australia had reflections in other parts of the world - especially the English-speaking world. The development of local libraries represented a cost effective investment in community education. But they also enriched the lives of citizens. Moreover, they provided the means of securing information for citizens out of recognition of their central role in the life of the political system. The development of the free libraries, in countries such as Australia, represented quite a contrast to the autocratic societies which denied access to information to all but the rich and powerful.

In my address in Hobart, I went on to examine the possibility of maintaining the ethos of free information services. I pointed to the development of information technology with its great potential but also very significant costs. I also drew attention to the growing force for privatisation of public sector facilities. I raised the question whether - to keep up with the technology and to provide enhanced services to citizens - it would be possible to retain the principle of free libraries beyond books. I acknowledged the great advantages which free libraries and free information services had produced for Australia and other like countries. But I questioned whether the advent of the new information technology would challenge our society to rethink the provision of information services. On line facilities would extend enormously the access to information available to the most modest library facility in the most remote place in Australia. Yet the notion that anyone could come into a library and idly interrogate data bases on the far side of the world at very large cost to the public purse did not seem feasible. Browsing through a book and searching for serendipity in acquisitions on the shelves was one thing. But the run-up of very large telecommunication costs, upon equipment which was itself expensive to buy and to use, seemed to demand a new economic regime.

My idea was not an immediately attractive one. If it remained necessary to keep library facilities open to the whole community it would be illegitimate to divide the free library and to confine free access to *books* whilst charging for the increasing bulk of information found in *electronic* form. The criterion of the technology did not seem an apt one for differentiation. A different and better criterion had to be found to mark off the core information services which every citizen could expect, simply as a member of the community, and the "super services" for which it was reasonable to make a charge.

It was reported to me later that my speech, which I blithely delivered and then left for consideration among the 600 librarians and their supporters, bitterly divided the group into the "people of principle" and the "people of pragmatism". The former clung to the notion of free information services, whatever the technology and whatever the cost. The latter, recognising changes in governmental and political moods, accepted that some charges would be made, recognised in a new technological situation, and sought to define as broadly as possible the core facility which would be available to citizens and others in our community simply because they paid their taxes. The ensuing debate has continued over many years. I took the issue over the Tasman to a conference in New Zealand in February 1988. The response of my audience was equally divided, for the tradition had been the same and the fears were identical. In the ensuing years, we have seen a number of developments which have challenged the notion of public libraries in both Australia and New Zealand. These challenges present some of the reasons why libraries in today's world need Friends.

THE CHALLENGES TO LIBRARIES TODAY

Anyone with any familiarity of libraries will know the tremendous challenges which they face in our world today. Professionals could speak with much greater knowledge than I. But amongst the challenges I would include:

1. *The user pays ethos:* The development which I saw coming in 1985 and 1988 is now certainly upon us. Although the notion of the free public library remains sacrosanct (and in some parts of Australia is guaranteed by statute) the introduction of fees for services has come slowly but surely into the provision of library and other information services. Usually it is justified by the provision of extra services, particularly in new electronic form. Often it is justified as a means of ensuring accountability of those who offer and use new services; the provision of revenue to enhance the general operations of a modern information provider; the introduction of greater variety which would otherwise be unavailable; the provision of greater efficiency and the acknowledgment that nothing in this world is really free and that the question is simply who, how and when information services are paid for. The arguments continue to rage. But they seem likely to point in the direction of at least some fees for some services. So the challenge before public libraries is one of defining which services *must be free* and which may be the subject of charges, upon what principle and when;
2. *Cost increases:* The deteriorating terms of trade affecting the Australian dollar has led to an increase in the costs of books and serials acquired from overseas. In law libraries, series long maintained have had to be discontinued by reason of the costs not only of journals but of postage or shipping. To some extent that has led to rationalisation. The growth of law schools, for example, has resulted in a growth of libraries. Rationalisation, particularly in the one city, of various serials is a sensible development promising economy and practical commonsense. The advent of new information technology has meant that some serials can safely be discontinued for they are readily available on line. But the new information technology brings its own costs. These must be

accommodated within budgets which, in the delightful phrase of the economists, often exhibit "negative growth".

The realignment of local government boundaries, the closure of libraries in some districts, the changing populations of others has led to an acceleration of the move for rationalisation of library facilities. This has not been an easy time for those whose professional careers have been devoted to library facilities. The closure is not only inconvenient to many members of the public. It may be devastating to the lives of employees and those who depend upon them;

3. *Informatics:* The new technology has produced remarkable advances of which every user of a library in Australia is aware. The younger that user is, the more likely it is that he or she will be comfortable with the new technology and demand closer and closer accessibility to it. To a very real extent, the human mind is increasingly becoming an apparatus connected to an online information system which enhances the meagre capacities of our human intelligence with the vast resources of information systems around the world.

Within Australia *Ozline*, announced recently by the Director-General of the National Library of Australia, links 1350 public libraries throughout this continent. There is an equivalent *Kiwiline* linking the public libraries of New Zealand. When fully operational, this new technology will greatly enhance every library connected in the system. But of course there is a cost. Mr Horton indicated that it was not feasible or proper that the cost should be passed on, in its entirety, to the user. But some costs will be passed on simply because, without a contribution, the facility would not be available within currently budgeted subventions;

4. *Special needs:* Australia's place in Asia and the Pacific has, at last, been appreciated. We were slow learners in coming to terms with our geography. Fortunately, we find ourselves in a part of the world which is

expanding at an enormous rate. As an English-speaking democracy we have much to offer. We should not pretend to be other than we are. Within our own country, the advent of so many newcomers from differing cultures and traditions (including those from Asia and the Pacific) will put new and different demands upon the information facilities provided by libraries. They will seek books and other facilities in their own languages. The day of the all English library facility has passed. This will add a factor of cost. It will make new demands upon library professionals. We must meet those demands as best we can in an equitable way within shrinking budgets.

Further challenges which are receiving more attention today, are the provision of general and specialised library facilities for users with disabilities. These extend to the visually impaired who are so greatly enriched by the provision of large print books, audio tapes and other modern library facilities. But they extend to other forms of inaccessibility and physical disability. In some countries this is guaranteed by law. But even where law does not provide an obligation, our moral sense should do so.

We should contribute books and other facilities to the less fortunate countries of our region. Within the legal profession, the Australian International Legal Resources (AILR) has been formed to provide legal texts to the countries of our region which desperately need information on law, lawmaking, legal procedure and basic rights. Six countries have been identified by AILR, namely Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia, Cambodia and Vietnam. Unused books are being shipped to these countries. But they also have a desperate need of access to better and more modern information systems. Australian citizens and Australian libraries should play a part in building the library resources of countries ravaged by war, oppression, epidemics and genocide. It was no accident

that, amongst the first victims of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, were the museums and the libraries and their employees. Very few books of the culture and history of Cambodia remained after Year Zero. Australia is now playing an important part in rebuilding the library and museum facilities of Cambodia. The death of a culture is a horrible prospect. It is when one sees what has happened in Cambodia that one realises the vital importance of libraries as guardians of culture and civilisation;

5. *Entertainment:* It is significant that Hollywood, rather than Detroit, is the centre of the most active export industry of the United States of America. Information Technology has changed so rapidly that the provision of data to the new generation must increasingly be in electronic form. These are the means by which citizens of the future will feel comfortable and will seek creative experience. This is not to say that books will go out of fashion. On the contrary, the sale of books continues to rise. But library facilities of the future must adapt to the changing demands of the public as the public seeks information in electronic form, interactive provision of data and access to knowledge in the dematerialised medium.

One can only hope that the passing of the old-fashioned method of providing information will not be accompanied by a confusion between information and mere entertainment. The discouraging news concerning the ignorance of Australian schoolchildren today about their constitution, the role of the Head of State, the function of Government and of the courts must be laid at somebody's door. By all means let the new information technology provide citizens with information. But there is a limit to entertainment. The limit is reached when basic data does not penetrate the consciousness of new citizens. This is a great challenge to teaching, to libraries and to information services. The challenge must be

met in the new format. But the core capital of intellectual development and of basic understanding of the world, of society and its government has to be secured during those formative years of education. Libraries play such an important part in that process; and

6. *Leisure:* We can see in our community the change from the work oriented society in which we of the older generation grew up and the new society which - voluntarily or involuntarily - must find for its people a greater role for leisure. Here again, library facilities will have a larger part to play in the life of the ordinary citizen. This is not simply to fill in time. It is to enrich the life of the individual and help thereby to define that individual in relation to others and to the community and the world. The end of the "new feudalism" which came with the Industrial Revolution and the 9 to 5 job puts an enormous challenge on information services. It is important that these services should be able to respond creatively and imaginatively.

THE NEED FOR FRIENDS

With so many challenges it is obvious that libraries throughout Australia, and beyond, need Friends. These are organisations of citizens who will support libraries without interfering unduly in the professional work which libraries perform.

Friends organisations have sprung up, particularly in the United States, where they have a history dating to the early decades of this century. To some extent we must be wary in copying blindly American models. The society of the United States is, in many important ways, different from that of Australia. This was brought home to me recently when I was in New York to present a report to the General Assembly on Cambodia. I had not been to that great metropolis for fifteen years. I was astonished by the sights of individual poverty that confronted me. Business-houses left their cardboard boxes in the street so that

the poor, the sick, the down-and-out could sleep in them, protected in part from the chill wind of November. We do not have a society with such an ethos. Yet in the United States the average contribution of each family to charities or community groups is about \$5,000. Our contributions in Australia are nothing like that. Doubtless this is because we have become used to looking to government to attend to our basic community needs.

Yet increasingly government is telling us that we should look to ourselves. The challenge will be to maintain the role of government as providing core services which are inherent in the very nature of our community and its basic needs. But at the same time looking to ourselves and to civic groups to offer support and assistance.

Organisations of Friends in Australia can perform vital work of fundraising to supplement the subventions of government. They can also provide essential feedback to the professionals and to the Library Boards which have the formal and statutory responsibilities of running information services and responding to the many challenges, some of which I have set out above. Organisations of Friends need not be older citizens who are in love with books. They should include younger information users who will have the enthusiasm to support modernisation of library facilities and who will regard as unarguable the need for automated systems freely available in every library.

When I was asked to be Patron of Friends of Libraries Australia I agreed at once. My thoughts went back to my first visit to a library. This was in 1946. It was at the North Strathfield Public School. As a boy of six, I first entered a library. I can still smell the distinctive smell of books in that modest schoolroom. Most importantly, I can smell the shiny paper of the new books, so rare in wartime and in the immediate post-war years. This was the magic world of the library. It has never lost its fascination for me. I was proud to serve on the Library Council of New South Wales and to give back a little for the many

years in which I sat in university and public libraries, studying the past in order to live with riches in the present and to make a small contribution to the future.

Friends of Libraries are those who wish to pay something back, and not only in note and coin, for the great gift of civilisation which libraries offer to us all. We should not take that gift for granted. We should tell our librarians how much we appreciate their efforts. We should tell our governments to continue with strong support - pointing to the countries in our region which are flourishing now from their investment in education, libraries and information systems. And we should tell our fellow citizens and ourselves that it is not enough to depend upon others. We must ourselves make an effort to ensure that this precious heritage is passed, enhanced and enlarged, to the coming generations.

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