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I LOVE PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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I love libraries, especially public libraries. I learned to love them at school, starting with North Strathfield Public School, which I attended in 1944-1948. When, at the University of Sydney, I started my studies in law, the old Law School in Phillip Street in 1959 had its own library. But it tended to be overheated and had ladders climbing up to the sky which challenged my agility and sense of balance. So I moved to the great reading room in the State Library of New South Wales. And I came to appreciate Lionel Murphy's advice to me. 'The best legal ideas', he said, 'do not come from legal books. They come from serendipity; from reading books outside the law. Including books on science'.

Public libraries have always played a big part in my life. Also in the life of my family. My father, who had all his marbles when he died nearly 96 in 2011, was a most faithful user of the Concord (later Canada Bay) Library. He was constantly photocopying articles from books (hopefully at pensioner rates). He was forever talking of the attentive, imaginative and painstaking service that he received at his local public library.

By the time my father was engaged in this way, I was working in the Court of Appeal of New South Wales and later in the High Court of Australia. In both of those places, I had access to wonderful libraries. Most of those libraries were open to use by members of the legal profession and needy members of the public. But the judges were

* Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009); Member of the Library Council of New South Wales (1979-1984); President, National Book Council (1980-1983); Patron of Friends of Libraries Australia (1990-2002).

naturally looked after, hand and foot. We were pampered. It was this mollycoddling that caused me to delay my entry into the electronic generation. However, this came along the minute I retired from the High Court. Gone was my Commonwealth car and special service in the Court libraries. I was back to using public libraries, supplemented by the miraculous new world of the internet.

The internet complements the service from a public library. However, there is still a need for public libraries with their professional workers. Scientists have not yet trained the internet to think by serendipity. To reason outside the square. To direct enquiries along novel, even illogical paths. This is what public libraries still offer to the people.

Over the past two years I have been serving the United Nations on a Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea. We embraced a methodology of transparency. We held public hearings and placed our testimony online. People everywhere in the world could procure access to our witnesses and the terrible stories they told of violations of basic human rights. Only in North Korea would ordinary citizens not have access to our Inquiry, and the report, conclusions and recommendations that we produced.

This experience taught me, if ever I had forgotten, how vital is access to information. This is the lifeblood of a democracy and a vibrant civil society. In sustaining these precious virtues, we need to protect free access to information on the internet. But we also need to protect access to public libraries. They are the lifeblood of a community that upholds universal human rights. I encourage the young, and not so

young, to read widely, to concentrate and think, and above all to explore the world of ideas beyond the comfort zone.

These are the reasons why I love public libraries. We should support them and fund them generously. The mind they expand could be your own.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. H. Auden".