

Conference countdown ... 49 weeks to go!



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The end of free library services?

here's a certain touch of irony ı the fact that as Australian ibrary Week draws to a close, orth Sydney residents will be sked to vote on an issue that ould mean the end of free brary services, not just for the lorth Sydney, but much furher afield.

On 24 September 1983, North Sydney ouncil will hold a compulsory referendum pout its library service, in conjunction with ie NSW local government elections. Resients of North Sydney will be asked:

Should North Sydney Council revoke the Library Act 1939 in order that a scale of fees and charges can be levied for the use of library services?

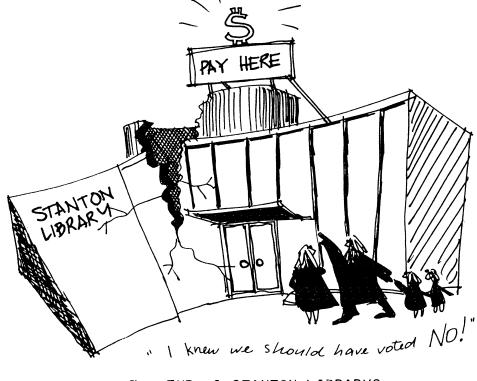
The Stanton Library (North Sydney's muicipal library) has long been the subject of erce debate by Council - on one side rongly defended as one of the best librars in the State, on the other criticised for its spenditure (7.64% of the rates in 1982), its on-resident usage (North Sydney is the fth largest commercial centre in ustralia), and its specialist architecture ollection (which is its responsibility as a articipant in the Sydney Subject Specialision Scheme).

The 'anti-library' faction, led by Alderan Michael Fitzpatrick, is in favour of fees or use of the library, particularly for nonesidents. Non-residents comprise 42% of brary membership, but North Sydney reeives a State Government Special Grant in ecognition of this disability. The 'probrary' faction, led by the Mayor, Alderman ed Mack, favours free libraries. To date ne Council has been independent of party olitics, but at the next elections endorsed iberal Party candidates will be standing.

Under the NSW Library Act, fees for use r membership cannot be charged, and the ibrary Councill of NSW has recently circurised local councils with a reinforced stateent of principle to this effect. North ydney Councill is therefore seeking to reoke its adoption of the Act, which can only e done by referendum.

The referendum is more than a local sue. If it succeeds, or even if it is not deeated by a large majority, it could have imlications for many other local authorities ithin the State, or even further afield. tanton Library staff are, of course, totally pposed to the referendum, but as employes of Council they are unable to be overtly

ivolved in any election campaign, so they



The END of STANTON LIBRARY?

are endeavouring to remain impartial, though most are sporting T-shirts with 'Let Libraries Run Free' emblazoned on the

Concerned citizens have established the 'Keep Stanton Free Committee' under the chairmanship of Peter Bridges, (02) 922 3335. The committee has published a pamphlet, which is being distributed from a stand outside the library on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and on local market days. The pamphlet is also being letterdropped and a bumper sticker, Keep Stanton Free – Vote No, is being distributed.

The NSW branch of the LAA, in conjunction with the NSW Association of Local Government Librarians will hold a public meeting on 21 September. Speakers are: Richard Hall, Chairman of the Library Council, George Negus of Channel 9's current affairs programme '60 Minutes', and Peter Tranter, the retiring Deputy Mayor of North Sydney and Vice-chairman of Council's Library Committee.

Other public librarians are assisting in the fight by manning the stand outside the library, by letter-dropping, by staffing polling booths on election day, and by contributing financially towards printing and other

What's happening elsewhere?

In Holland only readers of 17 years or younger may borrow free of charge from public Libraries. There are special rates for the over-65s but all other users will have to pay either in the form of an annual subscription, a lending charge for each book or a combination of both. Local public libraries may choose from these options. This change was brought about by the Dutch Ministry of Welfare and Culture in a move that certainly does not seem to have had the welfare and community culture of the community at heart, and is, as Margreet Wijnstroom of IFLA, says, 'a sad moment in the history of the Dutch public library movement'.

The same question has also arisen in England where Councillor Kenneth Rose of Sutton Borough Council has been supporting library charges, saying that they would bring about a better and more efficient service. The 'Comment' column of the *Library* Association Record comments that the pressure for privatisation of libraries would, if successful, put information beyond the reach of those who cannot pay. They continue:

The penny-pinching spirit, fostering the emergence of an information-elite, is shameful by comparison with countries like Australia, where everything is free.

Although most of us may not have noticed that 'everything is free' in Australia, let us at least preserve the spirit of democracy and keep libraries and their services free to everyone living in this country.

WATCH THE NEXT ISSUE for these important news items

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- Australian Library and Information Research Foundation
- the latest on copyright
- Futures Committee seminar