

HARD TIMES: a comment on complacency

by Julian Woods

... surfaced at last on a front page (*InCite* vol.8 No.2) — public libraries are in a state of crisis!

In NSW we are so depressed that we can't even communicate effectively any longer. Some of us are so ashamed that we just don't discuss it, like former POW's who meet and remember misdeeds necessary for survival.

Library services in NSW manage with a stretched 2 percent or less of councils' budgets, then with stern realism equate blatant neglect with 'facing facts' and try to save our miserable faces by repeating the giant confidence trick of the 1980's that the 'times are tough'.

In NSW we have been slowly bled to death over 10 years by the most insidious mixture of indifference and hypocrisy.

Tough? Our expenditures scarcely create a ripple in the financial structures of shires with a population of 5,000, yet we librarians offer our troubles to world economic conditions and submit to the anti-library lobby, stock exchange gamblers, the philistines and the asphalt-worshippers agreeing to bow before the giant world totalizer system, the New York and Tokyo stock exchanges.

By listening to financial commentators on every TV news, we hear about the hundreds of millions lost and won, the takeovers, the magic decimals of currency rates, and become reconciled to our dwindling little services which soon will require the scathing prose of another Ralph Munn to do them justice.

And when we turn to the state for relief from the 'New Moronity' of local government we find people like Mathews in Victoria, Deas and Carr in NSW saying how 'supportive' they are, what 'friends' they are to public libraries while they successfully weasel their way out of responsibility for the situation.

At least libraries in Victoria have received sudden and unexpected blow which has urged them into action. In NSW we have been slowly bled to death over 10 years by the most insidious mixture of indifference and hypocrisy.

We keep an up-front A&R chain-store and newsagent type of library that hopes to be breathlessly attractive, shiny and contemporary without the solid guts of decent bookstock in it.

The remedy is simple and does not depend on the current political nonsense of how tough the times are. We don't want rate increases. We want a slight rearrangement of thin Councils' finances, 4-6 percent of the budget and similar, and even slighter rearrangement of state finances.

In NSW the Department of the Arts has a 10 million budget, less than 1 percent of state expenditure, and of that sum public libraries command only \$11 million for a population of nearly 5 million!

It's priorities, nothing more, that are wrong, the priorities of the complacent Australian philistine that stand in our way.

The really sad thing, apart from our swallowing the 'tough times' con, is that our own standards are falling. We don't even keep and preserve books any longer. We keep an up-front, A&R chain-store and newsagent type of library that hopes to be breathlessly attractive, shiny and contemporary without the solid guts of decent bookstock in it. We have not got the quality of an 1890's School of Arts collection. We preserve no cultural standards at all.

But it all fits, the downward spiral, obstructive philistinism, loss of confidence, loss of standards, grasping at phoney economic excuses.

As we cannot acquire books we show our professional disdain in the only way open to us, consigning whole generations of our written culture to the municipal tip. Valuable works, copies of which were available in their dozens in the 1950's and 60's have completely disappeared from ready access, so that giant systems of location and searching have to be invented to dig up a single copy of a book in far away Perth, which, in the long run, isn't available for loan.

The simple proposition is beyond us — there is no substitute for books on the shelf in our own libraries.

What kind of a profession are we whose members are satisfied with one copy of a book somewhere in Australia, possibly 'available' for interlibrary loan, when there are tens of thousands of such books which should be on the shelves of dozens of public libraries, to be browsed through by the whole population in perpetuity? How do you think the New York Public Library educated whole generations in the 20's, 30's, 40's and beyond, to be gratefully remembered in the memoirs of writers, scientists, leaders, and Nobel Prize winners?

But it all fits, the downward spiral, obstructive philistinism, loss of confidence, loss of standards, grasping at phoney economic excuses for decline and ending in a bland stoicism which is indistinguishable from an idiotic complacency.

Well, I for one will not beseech ministers or aldermen or councillors any more. I am telling them (nicely of course) that they are parasites riding on the backs of the educated, that civilised standards are the better standards and our pathetic little collections and services are a disgrace, even in a banana monarchy.

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