

Australia as an information society

PUBLIC LIBRARIES
IN AUSTRALIAReport of the
Committee of Inquiry
into Public Libraries

Allan Horton and his 1976 report – coming round for the third time?

ON 31 MAY Michael Duffy proposed in Parliament that there should be a House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies, to examine:

- matters, whether economic, social, cultural or structural, relating to the strength and well-being of Australia and its ability to contribute to the resolution of international problems; and
- such other matters relating to long-term strategies as may be referred to it by:
 - (i) resolution of the House; or
 - (ii) a Minister.

The new committee has Barry Jones as Chairman. At the time, the *Age* reported Mr Jones as saying that his new job was 'the sort of thing that a minister for the future would do, if you had a minister for the future'. The committee was expected to look at issues like the VFT or the Multi-function Polis, assessing benefits, the cost to the community, and so on.

In fact, the first issue the committee will inquire into is 'Australia as an Information Society', basing its inquiry on the 1976 "Horton Report". It advertised in mid-September for public submissions, with a closing date of 25 October 1990. As mentioned in *inCite* 16, General Council included discussion of a possible ALIA submission in its Perth meeting.

The committee has issued some information notes on its inquiry, which are reproduced here by permission of the Secretary.

The committee intends that the

inquiry will initially focus on the general policy aspects of Australia as an information society. Later stages will deal with the development of libraries and the provision of information to parliamentarians.

The committee proposes to examine the concept of an 'Information Society' under these headings:

National information policy

Under the Federal system, no single Minister has responsibility for information policy, setting the rules of the game about the questions of access to information. Information related subjects have a divided responsibility, for example:

- the IT industry (dealing with hardware and software) is the responsibility of the Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce;
- the provision of telecommunications services (radio, television, telephone) is run by the Minister for Transport and Communications;
- the provision of educational services is the divided responsibility of the Minister for Employment, Education and Training and the relevant state ministers, and
- the National Library is part of the responsibility of the Minister for Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, but she has no responsibility for libraries and library standards generally.

No minister takes general responsibility for a conceptual or policy

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

News and Articles

Information Online

7

The Source

14

Regular Features

In the News

10

Feedback

13

Events

16

Who's Where

19

REGISTERED BY AUSTRALIA POST
PUBLICATION N° NBG 1263
ISSN 0 158-0876

framework in information issues. However, a number of professional groups, especially in library services, have called for the establishment of a National Information Policy.

No minister takes general responsibility for a conceptual or policy framework in information issues.

The issues for the inquiry include the following:

- the desirability (or otherwise) of adopting a National Information Policy which would set out matters which governments should be aware of, and the community should be informed about, relating to information access and its importance in Australian society, culture and the economy;
- what elements should be included in a National Information Policy;
- questions of equity in information access and transfer;
- the international dimension of the 'information explosion', its impact on

continued 3...

continued from 1...

national sovereignty and personal privacy; and

- the importance of 'information' as a factor of production, with the potential to create employment and export income, recognising the threats to national sovereignty and security of failing to have an adequate national capacity to anticipate and respond to new elements in this area of increasing international importance.

Libraries and their future

In March 1975 a Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries in Australia was appointed by the then Prime Minister of Australia (Hon. E G Whitlam) to inquire into and report on the current role and effectiveness of State, regional and municipal libraries in serving the information and recreational needs of the community. The committee was chaired by Allan Horton. The Horton Report *Public libraries in Australia* was published in March 1976 and made a series of recommendations about networking to avoid duplication of expenditure functions and to make the most effective use of resources.

The majority of recommendations were never acted on. The report is now 14 years old. Are its recommendations — the only serious public inquiry into library

services in Australia — still relevant in 1990? Has the situation for libraries improved, deteriorated or has the status quo been maintained?

The committee does not intend to repeat the work of the Horton inquiry, but sees the report as the basis for its review.

Libraries may be seen as mere passive repositories, places of last resort, instead of being seen as places for the generation of information and creating synergies.

With the increasing use of computer-based information technologies, complementary to (and often challenging or displacing) the book-based culture, there is a danger that libraries are seen as increasingly peripheral and that no minister takes direct responsibility for them. Libraries may be seen as mere passive repositories, places of last resort, instead of being seen as places for the generation of

information and creating synergies.

Additional factors relevant to the future of libraries include the following:

- the new emphasis on life-long learning and retraining;
- the emergence of business information services as commercial ventures in public libraries;
- the need to reconsider the traditional approaches to funding within a climate of 'user pays'; and
- the need for improvement in the foundation that has been laid for improved planning, coordination and management.

The issues for the inquiry may include the following:

- are public library services able to provide adequate services for the information and recreation needs of the community;
- are the recommendations of the Horton Report *Public libraries in Australia* still relevant, and if so, to what extent, 14 years after its publication;
- has the situation improved, deteriorated or been unchanged since then;
- is the book-based culture under threat in a computer-driven age of information; and
- who takes political responsibility for libraries and who should do so?

The parliament and information

At a time of growing complexity in political issues, of which industrial restructuring, the Multi-function Polis,

**NOW A LIFETIME
OF RESEARCH ONLY
NEEDS A MINUTE.
NOT A MONK.**



Business Periodicals Ondisc (BPO) contains scanned images of the full text of more than 350 leading business, management, economics and financial journals throughout the world, including Australia, from 1987 onwards. It quite simply allows you to identify, select, view and print out articles on the particular subjects you require at the touch of a button.

It's hard to overestimate the enormous breakthrough BPO represents for both the novice and professional researcher, saving literally thousands of hours otherwise spent locating relevant information. BPO is part of a growing family of full-text CD-ROM databases from U.M.I. which will soon include engineering and general interest periodicals.

All told, it's researching power you wouldn't find even in a monk of Sundays.

aldis
AUSTRALIAN LASER DISK INFORMATION SERVICES

changes in telecommunications, privatisation generally and foreign policy are five current examples, the Parliament is sitting less — only 36 days in 1990. How do Members of Parliament come to grips with complex policy issues; for example, in science of technology generally? The major issue for the Long Term Strategies Committee is to examine the information imbalance between the bureaucracy and the legislature.

The bureaucracy is 'information rich' and increasingly powerful. It can be argued that the Parliament is 'information poor'. There appears to be a massive information flow, judging from the mountain of paper which pours into the Member of Parliament's office, but massive public documents can conceal as much as they reveal. Even Budget papers are sometimes extraordinarily difficult to interpret. How many back-bench Members of Parliament really understand how the Budget process works? Can the Parliament make a more informed approach by more use of committees, by providing more on-line services such as fax machines, computers and modems? Is there a greater need for interpretative mechanisms such as the Office for Technology Assessment (OTA) in the US Congress, for upgraded Parliamentary Library services, and for a regular series of seminars by distinguished speakers on complex subjects?

The following issues may be covered in the inquiry:

- is the information processing capacity of the Parliament generally, the Members individually, declining relative to that of the bureaucracy and, if it is declining, what implications does this have for the democratic process;
- what changes would enable a higher proportion of Members of Parliament to feel that they are able to absorb the information that would enable them to make a significant contribution to Parliamentary debates on complex issues; and
- how do Members of Parliament come to grips with new and complex issues such as VFT, MFP, technological sovereignty and genetic engineering?

Footnote by the inCite editor

The library and information profession will be delighted that this new standing committee is to inquire into its concerns. The range of issues canvassed should enable any interested member to contribute to the discussion.

Many members will not however appreciate just how long information policy discussions have been on-again off-again in Australia. Australia was an early enthusiast for an information policy.

continued 4...

Information society and information policy

FORTUITOUSLY, given the topic of the front-page article, Nick Moore provides a brisk and fascinating encapsulation of these difficult topics in a survey article in the August 1990 *British Book News*. His survey is confined to UK authors, but we should not feel short changed. It includes work by Tony Cawkell, Michael Brittain, Blaise Cronin, John Gray, Bill Martin and Charles Oppenheim and a bibliography of nearly 40 items.

Moore reports that: 'It is said that we are currently experiencing a technological change which is every bit as significant (as the industrial revolution); the combination of the power of computers and the transmission capabilities of telecommunications is moving us inexorably towards a society that will prove qualitatively different from the one we know today.'

On one view there is a 'technological imperative' which we cannot escape. Other views consider social values and how these should determine and shape developments. The problem is not just one of understanding the technology, but managing it and obtaining profit from it. At a different level, the technology is increasingly coming home to us — literally — and becoming more deeply integrated into our lives.

The 'information sector' in the economy is much discussed but difficult to

quantify. Moore examines a number of attempts to map and measure this sector and its implications, for example in the market for information services.

In both large and smaller organisations there is growing recognition of the importance of information as a management resource. There is no certainty that top managers are using this resource effectively, whether in business, government or education. Indeed, the question is asked: 'Is government policy determined more by ideological conviction and presupposition than by hard facts?'

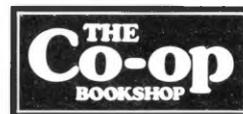
The wide range of issues canvassed here seems to demand a policy framework to allow us to grasp the opportunities and avoid the pitfalls. Some of the issues, such as privacy, freedom of information and the broader legal aspects associated with information use are familiar to us. But what are the educational requirements? Not only to train the variety of information practitioners (looking towards Cronin's 'Post-professionalism') but also to ensure that the next generation can truly live up to the social demands that the information society will make.

Moore's article is recommended reading, and a splendid curtain-raiser for working your way through that rich and exciting bibliography.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

CO-OP SUBSCRIPTIONS

Australia's largest academic bookseller is also
Australia's leading subscription agency -
the local subscription agency with global reach



THE UNIVERSITY CO-OPERATIVE BOOKSHOP LTD
SPONSORS OF GRATISNET SINCE 1986

80 Bay St, PO Box 54, Broadway NSW 2007 Australia

Ph (02) 212-2222 Fax (02) 212-3372

Toll Free (008) 222-762 ILANET MLN208200

Contact Grahame Manns, Manager, for details.

continued from 3...

The National Library Council set up the Scientific and Technical Information Services Enquiry Committee (STISEC) in 1971, in part as a response to the activities of an OECD Information Policy Group. STISEC recommended a National Scientific and Technical Information Authority for Australia, to oversee STI development as an integrated part of a total national system, but this became lost from sight in a succession of interdepartmental committees.

Meanwhile, another major review had been under way. As mentioned above, the Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries was established by Gough Whitlam in March 1975. It reported the following year to Malcolm Fraser. Its report, the Horton Report, was presented to Parliament (Dr Blewitt subsequently remarked 'I think the date is symbolic') on April Fools Day 1976.

The report showed that 7 per cent of the population were then totally unserved by libraries within the area in which they lived. One hundred and twelve local government areas with a population of 816 000 had no library services. There was inadequate provision for ethnic communities, for the aged, for the handicapped and for Aborigines. There was a lack of qualified staff, particularly in the disadvantaged areas and specialised fields.

The report proposed a 10-year cooperative plan between the Commonwealth, the States and local government whereby these defects might be remedied. It urged that Federal aid be given to the extent of \$20 million a year for the next 10 years and that a national 'Public Libraries and Information Council' should be established to formulate advice to government on national policies for the development of library and information services for the public.

The Horton Report received something of a run-around. It was referred within a fortnight to another Inter-Departmental Working Group, and was

forwarded to the State Premiers. The Working Group's confidential report, considering a Resource Sharing Networks proposal of the NLA as well as the Horton study, was submitted to the then Minister for Administrative Services in August 1977. Two years later, a new Inter-Departmental Working Group was established to review changes which had taken place since 1976.

...but this became lost from sight in a succession of interdepartmental committees.

The 1979 Working Group reported in September 1980. It recommended further study of school/community libraries in Australia, and further development of library services for the handicapped at the national level.

In view of the Government's federalism policies, it recommended that *no* special funds should be allocated to the States for the provision of public library services, but that the Commonwealth should play a role in nationwide cooperation and coordination of library services. This should be achieved through:

- The establishment of an Australian Libraries and Information Council (ALIC), as proposed by the State Librarians Council and the National Library of Australia, to be responsible for providing advice to governments at all levels on the development of library and related information services in Australia with particular regard to:
 - (a) the formulation and progressive development of a national plan for the development of library and related information services at the national, State and local government levels, and
 - (b) the establishment and operation of mechanisms to facilitate resource sharing in the field of libraries and related information services.

(ALIC was set up by the Federal government in 1982)

- The strengthening of the Advisory Committees of the Council of the National Library of Australia and the Networks Committee of the National Library to ensure effective cooperation with the Australian Libraries and Information Council; and
- The support at an appropriate level by the National Library of the activities of the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS).

Two years later saw the emergence of two distinct and (as it transpired) competing bodies. One was ALIC. The other was another series of inter-departmental meetings, starting in 1983, in which the Department of Science tried on behalf of the Labor Party Caucus to breathe life into the Party's platform statement on information policy.

Caucus suggested that the Government should reconvene the Horton Committee, update the report and use it as a means of implementing the information policy. But the interdepartmental meeting considered that, eight years on, the Horton report was an inappropriate starting point and proposed instead that it should develop a discussion paper on information policy as a basis for a national conference. This duly happened.

ALIC, through 5 years and 20 meetings, failed to give much practical advice to governments and was considered by the profession to be incapable of dealing with the burning issues of the day. A review committee, set up to examine these criticisms, not only agreed with them but also saw competition between ALIC and a professional body founded in 1956, the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services, AACOBS. The committee accepted ALIC's own suggestion that it should cease its separate existence and merge with AACOBS, forming the Australian Council of Library and Information Services (ACLIS).

Almost in the same month the aftermath of a general election wiped out the Department of Science in the course of ministerial restructuring, and with it the interdepartmental meetings. With a stroke of the pen four years' preparation for an information policy was lost, before any results could be reported to Cabinet.

With this background, it can be seen that the new committee has much to get its teeth into. We can only wish it every success.



National Centre for
Australian Studies

GNAB

THORPE



Members may have received a copy of a publicity letter (July 1990) on Bookmark which states 'The Australian Library Association is fully informed on Bookmark and is awaiting our response as to the acceptance of the service by Australian libraries'. The Association is not considering Bookmark, and is not awaiting a response from Bookmark on any matter whatsoever.

Sue Kosse
Executive Director