

# FRONTLINE



John Levett, President-elect

To Lynn Allen  
President  
ALIA  
c/- inCite

Dear Lynn, I read your recent (24 September) Frontline on the role of ALIA's President with close attention; what came to mind was Voltaire's aphorism on the execution of Admiral

Byng\*. It is with 'the others' who may be tempted to consider the Presidency in mind that I accept your invitation to reply — not to all the issues that you raise — but to the central one, the role of ALIA's President. And I'm not sure whether you wished to encourage public or private responses, but it seems to me that since the matter has been raised publicly, and since the burden of your message may weigh heavily on future candidates, one ought to respond publicly.

At the Perth Conference, I asked a senior colleague why he thought it was that we had ten candidates for the current Board of Education elections, and only two for the Vice-Presidency; he thought there were two reasons for this: one, that a diffident candidate could lose an election for the Board without losing face, but also, and more importantly in view of your Frontline, the perceived workload and responsibility which attached to the Presidency.

As the incoming President (and one, who incidentally, 'lost' two previous elections, both to excellent candidates — John Brudenall and John

Balnaves), I was much intrigued by his comment. I have said elsewhere that the Association does little to groom, to educate, to select, or to support, candidates and for none is this omission more apparent, paradoxically, than for the highest, and most responsible office. One can of course, argue that in

*...principal among which is the relationship between the President and the Executive Director.*

a democratic, indeed, an ultra-democratic body, this is proper, and that a candidate should be able to offer for the Presidency from any level in the Association, regardless of his/her previous experience, talent, involvement, even sympathy with the Association's objectives.

Proper, it may be, but I would suggest that a cautious association, and one which looks to its future, ought, perhaps, to spend more time considering — if it thinks the Presidency is a

\* Readers may like to be reminded that Admiral Byng led a Royal Navy mission to Minorca in 1756 to relieve a fort under siege by the French. He failed, and on his return he was court-martialled and shot. Voltaire commented, in *Candide*, that it was 'to encourage the others'. (ed.)

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significant office (which of course it may not) — the education of its candidates. But in a sense, this is tangential to your main line of discussion: the burden of the Presidency.

I think it is probably fair to observe that many, if not the majority, of the Association's office holders enjoy a degree of support, overt, or unacknowledged, from their employer. In the simplest sense, this may consist of no more than free office heating and lighting, or it may run to very high levels indeed: stationery, postage, computing, secretarial — and large amounts of released, and salaried, time. I could not put a value on this across the Association as a whole, but when I was editing the *Australian Library Journal* from the University of Tasmania, I would have put it at not less than \$10 000 in any one year. I would also guess that two of our most active Presidents in recent years enjoyed something like a half-time release from their employment. This was, and is often, freely granted by an understanding employer, but I would judge that such privileges apply differentially across the employment sector, in that those employed in academic institutions are expected and encouraged to undertake high levels of involvement in the areas of their vocation. In a school library, a public library, or a special library, the case may be somewhat different.

I think it also matters how close you are to the top of the organisation; I have not studied the background of all of our Presidents, but I would guess that a majority were chiefs in their particular context. I draw no conclusions from this observation, but if it is true, it would suggest that context and level of employment bear heavily on one's eligibility to stand for the Presidency, or indeed for any other office where large inputs are required.

Added to this is the expectation, sometimes unreasonable, which the membership, the ALIA National Office, and one's colleagues have of one. At the Perth Conference, no less than 148 people were kind enough to let me know what their expectations were, and some of them were awesome indeed. I have no doubt that the Presidency would, if one let it, become something more than a full-time job, and I agree with your assertions; the *tangible* returns on such an investment of oneself are likely to be minimal.

Clearly, at some stage, the question of priorities has to be addressed, but before this, I think a President must decide what it is that she/he wishes to achieve (and this in a very short space of time), what style to adopt, and how closely, to use Tom Peters' striking phrase, to stick to the knitting. The

vice-presidential year is invaluable in this; one has an opportunity to study the current President at close quarters, to decide what one's own style will be. To determine, even, how lightly, or how heavily, one will let one's hand lie on the Association.

This last will also be influenced by a range of factors external to the candidate, principal among which is the relationship between the President and the Executive Director. For instance, if there is no formally appointed Deputy Executive Director, one might assume that a President would be much more heavily involved in the administration of the Association if there were a vacancy in the Executive

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*...the Presidency would, if one let it, become something more than a full-time job.*

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Directorship, or if that office were not being competently discharged. You yourself suggest that at times, and legitimately, I have no doubt, much of what you think you should do, to use your own words 'strikes (you) as being an Executive Director's role', and that the 'Executive director and her staff are already working inordinate hours'. Certainly, the Association has had some Presidents who thought they were Executive Directors, and perhaps the reverse has occasionally been true; but here you do touch on a crucial point, the balance and the nature of the relationship between the President and the Executive Director. As in most marriages of convenience, the optimal situation would be one of mutual respect, trust and confidence, backed by the sure knowledge that each has the capacity to make life hell for the other if these essential qualities are not in evidence. The President must support, encourage and be mentor to the Executive Director, and the reverse must also apply. And this is about as far as it is reasonable to go by way of prescription. Each President must work these matters out independently.

I come now to the question of priorities; with this is interlinked the question of what is obligation, and what is optional. The obligation is, literally, to preside. My favourite dictionary (Chambers Twentieth Century) says:

'to be in the chair; to be at the head;

to superintend; to be guardian or tutelary god ...'

Clearly, one must chair the meetings of General Council. One could, it is true, do it by simply walking into the meetings, picking up the agenda, and going to work. Sir Peter Crisp could do that, such was his experience and capacity, but I couldn't. Even as a General Councillor, to be effective, one must spend the equivalent of 2 to 3 days merely to get on top of the agenda. One also has to preside over the AGM, and perhaps even — though this is convention rather than obligation — deliver the Presidential Address to an audience of thousands in conference year, to somewhat fewer in other years. One also is an official signatory on the Association's behalf.

That much is obligation, but after that, it is very much up to the individual, and totally legitimate, to *choose* her/his level of involvement. Some Presidents choose to operate without an Executive Committee, though I think that to deprive oneself of regular and frequent consultation with such close colleagues would be to cut oneself off from invaluable counsel. Most, of course, choose to do much more than the merely obligatory, and I guess they would not have stood for the office if they did not have some firm idea of what it was that they could *give* to the Association by way of 'optional extras'. My own estimate is that an active President would need roughly half time, say 20 hours, perhaps more, a week, to do the job to his/her satisfaction. Even then, she/he will have to be quite firm about priorities, just as any political figure must be. She/he will sometimes have to balance internal (to the Association) demands, with external ones; i.e. if you could only write one letter a day, will you choose to write it to an ALIA member, or to an influential external destination — a politician, a bureaucrat, a newspaper. If you choose the first, you may have a satisfied colleague or member, but the Association

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*Libraries in Distress continued from 1...*

UNESCO's assistance was sought earlier this year in Cambodia for a project to repair and restore the ancient monuments at Angkor Wat; and for help in re-establishing the Cambodian National Library. Professor Mayor has appealed to UNESCO Member States for contributions to this work. The National Library building in the capital, Phnom Penh, had been built in 1924 during the French colonial era and extended by the Government of Cambodia after achieving full independence in 1953. But after 1975 it was used as an animal shelter, and the extensive collections and catalogues were largely destroyed.

By 1979 it was possible to consider restoring order to the 20 per cent or so of the collections that remained, but there was a shortage of equipment and facilities, and no professional guidance. Experts with the Joint Australian Non-Government Organisations (JANGO) group in Cambodia estimate that basic repairs to the building could be done for around US\$12 000, and on-the-job training for library management and reorganisation of collections for US\$23 000.

In response to the UNESCO appeal, the Australian government has given \$30 000 to cover repairs to the building. Workers with the (Australian)

Freedom from Hunger group in Phnom Penh will oversee the project on behalf of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO.

...(these) people look after priceless treasures. They must be helped.

Neil Manton, from the Cultural Relations Branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has just returned from Phnom Penh. He provided the photographs, and with his permission I quote from the draft of his report, which conveys a vivid sense of urgency and spontaneity.

*Met the Director, who was one of the two survivors from the old staff, the rest being killed by the Khmer Rouge. He is not library-trained; nor is anyone else on the staff.*

*The library was badly treated and was used as a pigsty for many years. Most books and manuscripts were thrown into the streets, furniture and fittings were trashed.*

*Met Gail Morrison, an Australian volunteer whose faith and energy had*

*been restored by news of assistance from the Australian National Commission for UNESCO for a library restoration program.*

*A great deal of work has obviously been done to clean or replace library shelves and place the books on them, but in no real order. There is no catalogue, no inventory. There are no trained staff, no central admin. system — but people use the library.*

*Apart from essential repairs and the building itself — new roof, rewiring etc — any assistance which could be provided would be swallowed up.*

*I saw the Cornell University room (a small space with air conditioning) where the palm leaf manuscripts are being stored in boxes provided by the Cornell team. They are microfilming all manuscripts to provide Cornell with copies. Cornell is providing its catalogue of manuscripts held in NY and each library will end up with copies to fill gaps in each collection. The Cornell team will then move to the National Museum Library, where 60-70 more manuscripts are held.*

*The Library has a lot of gift collections of very dubious value. The works of Stalin and other benevolences from Vietnam and Socialist States are in pristine condition showing no signs of usage.*

*I saw a recently donated French library of translations of international authors. But staff made the following points:*

- French language is unknown to young Khmers and general material in French is a waste of time.
- Other languages are not supported, not studied and not welcome.
- English language material is what everyone wants.

*... We went up to the National Museum Library and met Gail Morrison again. Lovely remains of the library collection but in need of urgent conservation and restoration. Saw more manuscripts and staggering collection of photographs, glass plates and other records. There is a complete set of records of the Committee for the Conservation of Angkor Wat going back over 50 years. Conservation, copying, restoration and cataloguing are needed.*

*... A group of very pleasant and dedicated people look after priceless treasures. They must be helped.*

Nobody could fault that conclusion.  
*Peter Judge*

For some years now, the National Library of Australia has been helping the National Libraries of Laos and Vietnam. *InCite* will look at this assistance in a later issue, and if readers can contribute similar stories we shall be proud to print them. ■

*Frontline continued from 3...*

may, in the long run, be the loser. It is all a matter of choice, judgement and circumstance. Just like real life.

There are many reasons why people stand for the Presidency, and a lot of them are altruistic; I would not wish any candidate to be discouraged by the perceived workload from trying. Anyone who is fit to be a member of the Association ought to be fit to be its President; however, we may have to address more sympathetically than we have so far the need to encourage, to select, to school, likely candidates. We will have to take up seriously the notion of mentoring; many of us have been incidentally mentored, and this is the ideal. Some of us are lucky enough to be mentored all our lives, but others miss out. Perhaps this is one of the most important issues that any President, any healthy association, could address.

Lynn, thank you for your Frontline; thank you for having the courage to speak out on the Presidency, and thank you for having stimulated this unworthy candidate to pause and think about the Presidency and what it involves. I hope all your readers will have been similarly encouraged. ■

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