

# Front Line



John Levett  
President

'Half the year gone', the nagger in my mind (it sounds very like my mother) says, as I sit down to the keyboard for one more Front Line: 'and what have you done with it?' Every President, I suppose, is confronted with this question around the time of the winter solstice; if I tell my mental nagger what I truly believe, which is that Presidents don't actually do anything, they only make it possible for others to achieve, it only sniggers. So, in self-defence, I go to my diary and calendar, and wave them at this unpleasant mental monitor; I detect a quite audible sniff by way of return. My mother would have been the

perfect mythical rank and file member of ALIA, I think, with her silent gift for making you feel that whatever you had done, it wasn't enough; I don't think she actually coined the phrase 'And wot about the workers?', but she might have.

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All of this is by way of apology to those things still undone; the bulging file of correspondence, the Divisions yet unvisited, the papers not yet written. It's also an acknowledgement that the fulfilled Presidency is something of a myth, in that you could give it all of your time, say 60 hours a week, and it would still come back at you in whatever ghostly voice your conscience takes, and reproach you with your many acts of omission.

No doubt we all have midwinter thoughts like this, but the year has turned at last, and even in this most southerly outpost of ALIA, the days seem longer, and it is time for looking forward. It is time to start thinking about the garden again, and about the need to ensure that those members of ALIA who might be contemplating the Presidency, or any other of ALIA's many honorary offices as a stage in their careers, get all the encouragement they need in order to brush up their cvs and crystallise a nomination.

The Presidency is something of a catch 22; no-one who has not filled it can have any idea of the challenges and the rewards. But those who have done it run the risk, if they attempt to catalogue their own perceived shortcomings, of putting off any sensitive candidate; if they trumpet their achievements, they may well be accused of braggadocio.

One way out of the dilemma, it occurs to me, might be to catalogue the opportunities for personal and professional growth. The Presidency of ALIA is, without doubt, one of the five or six most important and influential appointments in our field; it ranks with the Chair of ACLIS, the Director-Generalship of the National Library, the

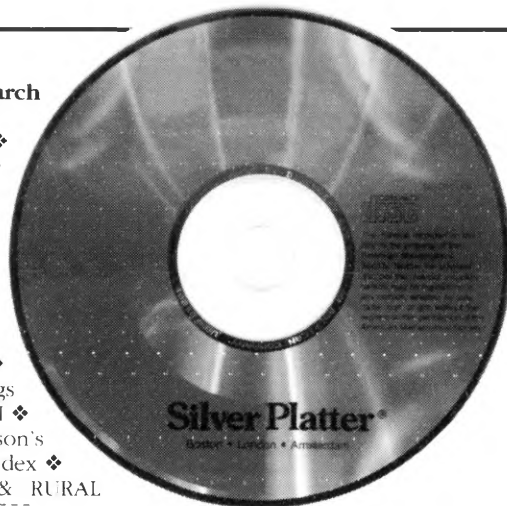
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Chair of the State Librarians' Council, the Chair of CAUL, in its capacity to affect the direction of developments in the profession. And every President, although she or he may inherit the policies of the Association, and the decisions (or non-decisions) of previous incumbents, has an unparalleled opportunity to exercise influence, if that is what you wish. But whether you wish it or not, personal growth will inevitably occur.

Presidents vary in their desire to achieve organisational change, or the illusion of it: (some take office in order to preserve the status quo; in the right circumstances, a not dishonourable option) but the *capacity* — to influence, to aid, to abet, to encourage — is always there. And even if you did nothing else but preside, that is, to chair the meetings of General Council, and that effectively, this would of itself be no mean achievement. There are many myths about our Presidency, as about any other, and no doubt each incumbent, wittingly or otherwise, adds to them.

One of the most enduring ones is that of omnipotence; but in fact and in precedent, the President has about the same capacity as Queen Victoria, i.e. 'to advise, to warn, to consent.' This perception of power may have led some candidates to stand on a reformist platform, as if ALIA were a corrupt and debilitated body which only they could cleanse and heal, but this is merely one more of the myths about our Association and its senior honorary office. The Association remains (as it has always been) in good health, and is (above all things) the expression of a collective will, of shared aspiration and commitment; it does not lend itself kindly to what has been called by one jovial, even Caesarean, Past-President 'the imperial' style of Presidency.

Nor does it need two Executive

Directors; although sufficient ink has been shed on this quite self-evident assertion as to raise at least the possibility that some Presidents have thought it necessary or desirable to act in this role. But to do so would not only be to run foul of the incumbent Executive Director, who by definition and occupation has the capacity and the responsibility to execute (though not as absolutely as they might like) and direct; it would also waste the opportunity for another, more Olympian and constructively detached viewpoint. If the President and Executive Director complement each other, they can achieve twice the leverage; if they merely compete, they will effect in sum much less than half of their potential total capacity.

*As Mick Dundee said 'It's a great life, and I wouldn't be dead for quids.'*

The same holds true for the membership as a whole; it cannot and will not be dragged along in the wake of ambition, or in the train of an 'imperial' President. It has many voices, and sometimes they contradict each other, but whatever the President chooses to attempt must first have been voiced or articulated by at least some of the members. General Council is the crystallisation of those many voices; it sometimes gives the impression of unwieldiness, of slowness, of stubbornness, even. But whether it shouts or whispers, or merely grumbles, it would be a foolhardy President who chose to ignore it. And if you are blessed with a constructive, thoughtful, hard-working and dedicated Council as this

incumbent and many of his predecessors have been, then you have wings to your feet and power to your elbow. To work for ALIA is then a joyful and a shared and positive experience.

I have in my mind a mental notice. It says: 'The Presidency need only take 12 days of your year' (Sue Kosse); 'year' has been crossed out, and 'month' inserted; but 'month' has in its turn been struck through, and 'week' inserted. At least, that's what we (myself and Mary Walker, Presidential aide, phone-answerer, amanuensis, whipper-in and solacer) sometimes think. But only sometimes. Like life, you can give the Presidency of ALIA as much, or as little of yourself as you like; and like life, it will reward you in exact proportion. And although I write here of the National Presidency, since that is the office foremost in my mind, what I have said applies to any one of the Association's many honorary offices and their occupants, to each and every one of whom we owe a great deal. 'Primus inter pares'; and to be the principal among so many dedicated colleagues is a privilege indeed. As Mick Dundee said 'It's a great life, and I wouldn't be dead for quids.'

And the nice thing about the National Presidency is: it's open to anyone. And yes, I've heard those grumbles that only the top managers need apply — i.e., that only those whose services are most dispensable to their organisations and who can afford the time or the income foregone, can afford to attempt it; but it is a bit like the magic pudding. Take as much or as little of it as you want, but the flavour is the same: challenge, satisfaction, congeniality, achievement. Anybody can do it, and everybody should; it's too much fun not to try it.

Nor is it too soon to begin thinking about it; if you've a mind to run this year, now is the time (as they say) to begin to 'put your affairs in order'.

Why not give it some thought? ☐

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