

The 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services

'You are revolutionaries... revolutionaries of the information age' President George Bush told the delegates to the 2nd White House Conference on Library and Information Services which was held from 10-13 July in Washington DC. A thousand conference delegates from across the United States took part in deciding recommendations for US public policy on libraries and information services for the next decade. This 2nd White House Conference followed the first held in 1979.

Keynote speakers included President George Bush, First Lady Barbara Bush, the Vice-President's wife Marilyn Quayle, the Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, Senator Paul Simon and the Librarian of Congress James Billington. Despite these and other high level speakers, the conference unfortunately was ignored by the mass media.

Under a three-umbrella theme — enhancing literacy, improving productivity and strengthening democracy — the White House Conference drafted policy recommendations for the President and the Congress of the United States. The delegates were selected at prior State and Territory conferences in the 50 US States, the District of Columbia, six US Territories and the Native American community. Delegates were drawn from four groups: library and information professionals; supporters or volunteers in library and information organisations; local, State and federal government officials; and members of the general public. Library and information experts were also appointed as delegates-at-large to provide subject expertise during the debates on policy recommendations.

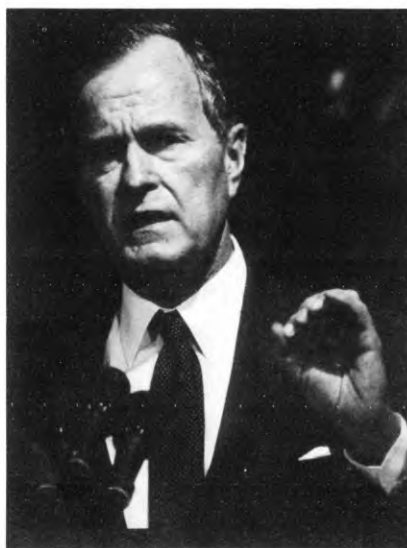
Two thousand five hundred policy recommendations from the State and Territory conferences were refined to 1100 recommendations. From these recommendations 100 issue statements were identified by the Conference Committee. Delegates then worked on these issues to develop the policy recommendations, in ten areas: access, networking, technology, personnel, national information policies, preservation, training of end users, marketing, services/ programs and governance. (The 1979 White House Conference had produced a set of 64 recommendations, of which 55 were acted upon by the US Federal Government.)

Key recommendations at the 1991 Conference included: an increase in resources for school libraries and public library services for children and youth; access by all libraries to the National Research and Education Network (NREN); creation of model programs to market libraries; increased funding for literacy programs; a re-examination of

by *Amanda Spink*

library and information science education and the establishment of a National Institute for Library and Information Services.

The deliberations were closely monitored by hundreds of observers and lobby groups, including the American Library Association, the Information Industry Association, the Special Library Association and the American Society for



President Bush opened the conference.

Information Science. International observers, known as 'information ambassadors', from 37 countries were also on hand. They included the National Librarian of Canada, and representatives from the OECD, Japan, Australia, the British Library, Mexico, the Netherlands and Jamaica.

The atmosphere at the conference was a mixture of a large town meeting and the razzamattaz of a Presidential Nominating Convention. Balloons and banners littered the conference floor and delegates sported buttons and funny hats with slogans such as 'Support your local library' and 'Louisiana for literacy'. Amid all the lobbying by special interest groups and political infighting, the conference delegates struggled with the challenges of formulating federal policy recommendations within a framework of enhancing literacy, increasing productivity and strengthening democracy, at a time when funds for library services are being drastically cut.

The conference was a good model of democracy in action, as the policy recommendations were drawn and debated from a broad cross-section of the US population and special interest groups in library and information services. But some delegates saw this emphasis on achieving

representation as depleting the focus of the conference and creating a miss mash of recommendations. Other delegates felt that the strongly represented American Library Association agenda (the ALA just finished their annual conference in Atlanta) dominated the proceedings. A number of delegates felt that the large number of school library delegates skewed the recommendations towards education at the expense of other library and information services issues.

There were two major thrusts in the policy recommendations which emerged from the conference. The first was a new emphasis on public and private partnerships in library and information services to provide funds at a time of drastic funding cuts in the public sector. The second was a major effort to link libraries and education, partly due to the large school library lobby and partly in an effort to tie into the Bush Administration's Education 2000 Policy.

Of the three conference themes; literacy, productivity and democracy, much of the emphasis was placed on literacy. Literacy and the crisis of 40 million US illiterates was perceived as the first priority. The link between libraries, information and productivity was much more difficult and a clear understanding of how to effect this in public policy has not been established. As to the link between libraries, information and democracy to make information freely available to all people, more talk than action was forthcoming at a time of a growing number of information poor.

An assessment of the success of the 2nd White House Conference on Library and Information Services, in terms of any implementation of its policy recommendations, will probably not be known for a few years. But for the library and information community in the United States the conference highlighted what one keynote speaker described as the 'truth' about the library situation. The truth is that library services continue to be drastically cut. Another conference speaker suggested a future scenario in which libraries as we know them will fade away, being replaced by electronic communications and information. To counteract this trend there is a real need for all libraries to re-evaluate both how they market information services and their future role in society.

Note on the author

Amanda Spink, formerly with AUSINET, is now working in New York and studying in the doctoral program at Rutgers University. She rang inCite out of the blue a few weeks ago to volunteer her services as our White House correspondent. Thank you, Amanda.