

Towards Federation 2001: a consensus

John Thompson describes the agenda for national action that is the successful outcome of this important conference

THE CONFERENCE *Towards Federation 2001: Linking Australians and their Heritage* was launched by the Minister for the Arts and Territories, the Hon. Wendy Fatin MP, at the National Library on 23 March. The 150 invited delegates, representing Australia's leading library and archival institutions, began their three days of concentrated discussions at Canberra's Lakeside Hotel on the following morning.

Eric Wainwright, the Chairman of the conference planning committee during the preceding twelve months, laid out a framework for the conference which was both inspirational and pragmatic. In the context of the Distributed National Collection, he suggested that the aim of the conference should be agreement on how to achieve the world's best national system for access to the records of the history and development of the Australian nation and its people. Lest this goal seemed too daunting and the steps needed to achieve it too difficult, Wainwright quoted from Russell Ackoff, that the thing to do with the future is not to forecast it but to create it. We should plan for a desirable future and invent ways to bring it about.

Ably chaired by Margaret Trask, the conference dealt with an ambitious agenda of topics concerned with the collecting, controlling preservation and provision of physical access to Australian documentary heritage materials, both the Australian imprint and a wide range of materials in special formats such as manuscripts, pictures, machine-readable records, oral history, maps, music and ephemera. The conference also gave consideration to the special needs of Aboriginal Australians, to Australians of different ethnic backgrounds and to people with disabilities.

Much of the work of the conference was carried out in small working sessions with groups looking at the special needs and problems of particular formats of material. A number of plenary sessions were also presented to provide both a context for the working discussions and to provide ideas for an improved cooperative effort between institutions and across different sectors of the information spectrum.

John Arnold of the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University reminded the audience that a number of critical gaps remained in the retrospective bibliography of Australia, and proposed ways of filling them.

Alison Crook, Ross Gibbs, Meg Cameron and Warren Horton looked from their different perspectives at the various political barriers which constitute an impediment to a better cooperative endeavour. And Derek Fielding steered a course through the difficult shoals of copyright.

By the final day of the conference when the delegates met at the National Library to consider the draft resolutions which had emerged from the original planning process and which had been refined in group discussion, it became apparent that much had been achieved. There was strong agreement by delegates on the principle of collaboration both between institutions and across sectors. Especially notable was the constructive dialogue and debate between library and archival institutions. Also important was the strong cooperative spirit which emerged between specialist collecting institutions such as the National Film and Sound Archive and the more traditional library and archival sector.

Overall, the conference achieved consensus on how to achieve a better national access by Australians to their recorded documentary heritage. An impressive body of 85 resolutions was negotiated by Margaret Trask. At the same time, a consciousness was raised among general administrators of key issues relating to special formats in fields such as music and oral history and of the special needs, sadly neglected in some parts of Australia, of aboriginals and of people from different ethnic backgrounds who have settled in this country.

The resolutions are currently being prepared for final distribution to each conference delegate, and copies may be requested from the NLA. A record of the conference, incorporating these resolutions, is also in the course of preparation and will be available from the NLA. Details will be announced in *inCite* as soon as they are available. For further information about the conference, contact Eric

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*Hard at work!
(left) Much of
the conference
activity took
place through
intense
discussion in
small groups
such as this.*



Some key identities at the opening function (from left): The Hon Wendy Fatin, MP, Minister for the Arts and Territories; Bev Kirby, President of ALIA; Eric Wainwright, Deputy Director-General, NLA, and Chair of the Conference planning committee; Tony Blunn, Secretary of DASETT and NLA Council member; Margaret Trask, Conference Chair.

Wendy Fatin launches the Conference

Cultural aspects of libraries are essential in our long-term planning, but there are no prospects of increased Commonwealth funding

OPENING THE CONFERENCE was the first opportunity for Minister Wendy Fatin to publicly address policy issues in the library and information area of her portfolio of Arts and Territories. In her speech she gave credit for initiating the Conference to the National Library and its Director-General, and to Eric Wainwright as 'the catalyst and lynch-pin behind the planning process'.

The Minister said that the Conference was a major outcome of the Australian Libraries Summit and quoted Warren Horton: 'the importance of the Summit lies in the fact that the Australian Library community has been largely marching to this agenda since 1988.' The vision statement for the Conference spoke of 'unlocking a storehouse of knowledge...libraries are the guardians of a nation's past, of its social, intellectual, artistic and cultural heritage.' This was right. Even in the present economic climate the cultural elements are vital—libraries should not concentrate only on technology for greater efficiency.

The Minister referred to the two Jones reports on 'Australia as an Information Society'. Her colleague for Industry, Technology and Commerce will give the Government's response to the first of these reports, but Miss Fatin will respond to the second, on library and information issues, probably during the current parliamentary session. This second report, among other proposals, suggested that the Government should issue a National Libraries Policy statement, and that the Commonwealth should fund public libraries.

The Minister has received numerous letters supporting this proposal. However, she noted that Government policy since 1980 gives responsibility for the direct funding of State and local libraries to State and Local Governments, while the Commonwealth funds the National Library of Australia and contributes to tertiary libraries. To change this policy would require a rather massive shift in priorities and funding and the Minister is not convinced that there has been sufficient shift in argument to justify such a change.

In her conclusion, she urged that the strategy for 2001 should take account of the macro picture in which it will have to operate. Libraries should develop new policies and practices with an eye to the broader Government economic and social policies. Library policies can be independent, but should not be isolated. The world is changing very rapidly around us. We should perhaps take a leaf out of our Asian neighbours' book, setting business and economic goals not three years ahead, but one or more decades—we must focus on 'Libraries Beyond 2001'! ■

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