

ACT Library Service review

Justice Rae Else-Mitchell spoke to ALIA ACT Branch on the dangers of government by consultants

(Justice Rae Else-Mitchell's speech to the Branch has had to be edited to about half its original length, but so far as possible without changing either the words or the emphases. Ed.)



Exactly seven years ago I was the guest at the dinner of the ACT Branch of the Library Association of Australia. I spoke of the history of the Canberra Public Library Service and outlined the plans for its future, which had been devised by the staff of the Service in association with the Advisory Committee of which I was then the Chairman.

These plans included:

- a change in the name of the Library, from Canberra Public Library Service to the ACT Library Service, to signify the new status of the library;
- an increase in the responsibility of senior staff and the upgrading of the position of the City Librarian to one comparable with a State Librarian;
- the construction of the Tuggeranong Town Centre Library;
- the implementation of the recommendations made by Ted Flowers in 1982 which included automation of the ACT Library Service;
- the collection of materials of historical and heritage significance as part of a move to make the library comparable to State Reference Libraries;
- the extension of opening hours including Sunday afternoons;
- the relocation of the Kingston Library and the acquisition of a second mobile library;
- the constitution of the Library as a Board or statutory authority, along the same lines as State Libraries.

Regrettably, in the confusion surrounding the introduction of self government in the ACT, little was done to achieve these goals. The name was changed; the construction of the Tuggeranong Town Centre Library gained impetus from local political pressures; but other recommendations were either rejected out of hand or deferred for political or financial reasons.

In spite of the failure to adopt the Development Plan the Library continued to provide a sound service to the ACT community and there was little or no dissatisfaction expressed about the nature and quality of the Service.

The 1986-1990 Development Plan was succeeded in 1991 by a Five Year Plan for 1991-1995 which restated several of the goals announced in 1986 including the creation of a statutory body to administer the library, the development of a central Territorial Library to embrace historical and heritage materials and a second mobile unit.

The goals of the Five Year Plan were in course of implementation when in 1992, for no obvious reasons, the ACT Government commissioned a review of the ACT Library Service, to:

- review present objectives against current responsibilities;

- examine the efficiency of the delivery of services, and
- recommend possible changes to current services.

When this review was announced, hopes were held that it would bring the Development Plan and the Five Year Plan up to date and recommend the implementation of the remaining proposals and any fresh ones which had emerged since 1986. But, contrary to these hopes and expectations, the review released a couple of months ago is most disappointing.

It does not proceed on the obvious basis of examining the 1986 and 1991 plans but instead offers a miscellany of comments, some derogatory, which have already done a good deal of harm to the morale and operative efficiency of the Service and many of the personnel. The review asserts that the approach to the review was 'highly consultative'. But the consultation was both inadequate and sporadic, in the case of the Advisory Committee only once, for part of an afternoon. The members were never asked to comment on any agenda or on any of the findings, even the most adverse findings.

So the review disregarded the cardinal principle of natural justice, enshrined in the law and public administration, that an adverse finding on any issue should not be made unless the party likely to be affected has been given an opportunity to respond to and comment on the proposed finding.

Secondly, in spite of a conclusion commending the commitment of the ACT Library Service staff, the review contains derogatory findings and observations like the following, which I quote:

- 'long standing conflicts at senior levels';
- 'poor performance monitoring';
- 'lack of communication throughout the organisation';
- 'a high level of inertia within the Service';
- 'a judgement of peers (unnamed) that the Service is isolationist';
- 'a lack of meaningful community input';
- 'a high degree of tension between professionals and non-professionals'.

I could go on with other like comments but will content myself with two general observations:

- firstly, if the authors of reports like this review choose to make assertions in extreme and damaging terms they should supply the evidence and identify their sources;
- secondly, it should be recognised that critical comments made in a public forum may give rise to actions for defamation and injury to reputations. Recent court decisions have established that book reviews of an extreme nature may land the reviewer in court as defendant in a claim for damages.

Curiously, these damaging assertions follow the finding that 'through careful planning and management and

► the commitment of ACT Library Service staff, the ACT can claim to have one of the best public library systems in Australia'. However, the report proceeded to say that 'even the best services are capable of improvement and we have been able to identify a number of areas where we believe ACT Library Service has the opportunity to provide an even better service'.

Many of the suggestions which follow were formulated many years ago. Is it likely that the authors of the review were unaware of the Flowers Review or the 1986 and 1991 Plans? In fact, an extra mobile library, Sunday afternoon opening, a territorial library incorporating a local historical and heritage library and the vacation of the Kingston building, have all been on the ACT Library Service agenda for a long time. These were devised to benefit the public. But the proposal to 'cease video, CD, music score and record collections' is likely to be strongly opposed. Modern public libraries all over the world see these items as 'library materials' a term which is no longer restricted to books and printed documents.

Some recommendations are obscure—for instance:

- 'ACT LS should build on its operational systems achievements to date and now shift its focus to user systems', and
- 'a focused staff development program for ACT LS should be developed using specialised resources from elsewhere in the ACT Government Service'.

Are these simply managerialist gobbledegook? If not, the review should have said what they really mean and how they should be implemented.

Of serious concern is the recommendation that 'staffing in central services should be reduced by 4 positions'. No reason is advanced for this in the review. Is this a product of Treasury anxiety to reduce costs? or was it motivated by some other unseen and undefined influence, or simply to show that the review would result in some financial economies?

There are some useful proposals, such as the creation of regional advisory committees and the combination of disability and other services. A good deal of the statistical data provides comparisons which may silence some of the criticism of the ACT Library Service as highly expensive and ineffective. But these and other commendable features are impaired by the general tone of the findings and comments. Consequently, I have little doubt that if the review is given full effect it will disturb the management and morale of the ACT Library Service and result in the Service becoming mediocre if not sub-standard.

I have written twice to the Minister for Urban Services, stating that the members of the Advisory Committee were opposed to the fragmentation of services which the review proposed, expressing the need for the Government to appoint a properly qualified Chief Librarian in place of the present unqualified acting director, and pointing out that the review had already damaged staff morale.

The review is important for this Association as well, for it may be the harbinger of steps to replace qualified librarians by 'management experts' who are quite unfamiliar with the complex issues of conducting a library Service, issues which managerialists tend to denigrate as pedestrian.

The review should certainly be published immediately as widely as possible for public and professional comment. Whoever initiated the review should give an undertaking that the recommendations will not be implemented but will be reconsidered in the light of public and professional reactions. Without such a procedure—an essential element of 'open government'—the review will not gain professional or community acceptance and the expected improvements in the Service are unlikely to be achieved. ■

(The Hon. Mr Justice Rae Else-Mitchell CMG, DLitt, FRAHS, FRAIPA—and many honorary distinctions—is perhaps best known in recent years for his sometimes controversial Chairmanship of the Commonwealth Grants Commission, 1974-1989. To pick only a tiny sample of his other achievements in a long, full and still very active life, he has been a Judge of the Supreme Court of NSW, a QC, lecturer in Australian Constitutional Law at Sydney University, Deputy Chancellor of Macquarie University, President of the State Library of NSW, Chairman of the ACT Library Service since 1975, a member of the Council of the NLA 1974-84. He received the Redmond Barry Award in 1986.)

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