

Federal responsibilities for libraries

Extracts for an article to be published in *The Sydney Review* by Federal MP Mark Latham, Member for Werriwa, NSW

Bob Hawke is now more commonly remembered for breaches of promise than promises fulfilled. At least on his 1990 declaration of Australia as a clever country substantial progress has been made.

Our universities now form a national grid with increased places and resources. Vocational training has been pinned to Australia's economic future and competitiveness. School retention rates have skyrocketed and child care moved within reach of most families.

Just as the Whitlam Government embraced Federal funding responsibilities for universities and schools, the Keating Government has entrenched TAFE and child care in the national budget. One gap remains in this impressive network of learning resources and national responsibilities: the clever country has not been clever enough in its support for municipal libraries. Federal MPs too infrequently find reasons to visit municipal libraries. Most are pampered by the outstanding services of the Parliamentary Library. Others are more interested in numbers than ideas.

The Commonwealth administrative orders demonstrate the difficulty in bringing together a national library policy. The Minister for Communications and the Arts is responsible for the National Library but no other aspect of library policy. The Minister for Employment, Education and Training is responsible for grants which indirectly assist school, university and TAFE libraries. The Minister for Housing and Regional Development is responsible for untied grants to local government that may indirectly assist municipal libraries, depending on the budgetary priorities of councils. It is clear from questions and answers recorded in Hansard on 27 June 1994 that the Department of Housing and Regional Development does not stock the information needed to develop a national policy on local libraries.

Libraries are another victim of Australia's complex and overlapping federal system of government. The States have adopted a disparate set of guidelines and commitments for specific purpose grants to municipal libraries. In NSW, for instance, the State Government provides only 15 per cent of public library funding compared with Victoria, Queensland and South Australia, which provide approximately 40 per cent. The standards and resources provided to libraries from local government's own sources of revenue vary substantially across Australia's 809 municipal authorities. Many councils are still more interested in bitumen roads than the information superhighway.

In recent years the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has faced up to the failures of federalism in services as diverse as electricity and technical education. No service suffers more from inconsistent standards and funding shortfalls in Australia than municipal libraries. No more popular or important service has been left off COAG's agenda. Public libraries are the most used cultural facility across the national, attracting the involvement of four in every 10 Australians. This involves 100 million loans and 10 million information requests per annum.

Per capita, Australia remains the largest English-language book market in the world. Unhappily, especially by international standards, the growth in private sales has not been matched by the public provision of books. For instance, Australia's 1.75 library books per head of population compares poorly with the Nordic nations — Finland 7.26, Denmark 6.24 and Sweden 5.22. Those who cannot afford private libraries suffer most from the shortcomings of public libraries. As

ever, in the observation of Saul Bellow, 'books are a poor boy's (and girl's) arsenal'.

The availability and quality of library services remains a significant gap in Australia's commitment to a just society. The Federal Government has an equity role to play in closing the gap between municipal responsibilities and municipal finances for libraries, particularly in disadvantaged local government areas. This can only be achieved by correcting one of the fiscal imbalances of federalism.

Gough Whitlam, the recipient of the 1994 Redmond Barry Award, founded his political program on a basic redefinition of federal relations: in Australia, if a significant function is not financed by the national Government it will be unfairly financed, inadequately financed or not financed at all. Whatever the revisionists may now say about Whitlam's program, no one can question the validity of its principles for the proper functioning of public libraries. It is never easy to entrench new principles in the administration of government. Invariably it takes a new report, study or change in technology to prompt reform. For decades, librarians and library users in Australia have despaired at the failure of the Federal Government to accept a direct funding responsibility for public libraries. Two new issues offer renewed hope and justify renewed attempts to shift government policy. Sometimes, worthwhile reform takes a long time.

Firstly, the Government's current review of the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1986* opens up an opportunity for a greater share of grants to be directed to libraries, especially for capital purposes.

Secondly, changes in information technology open up the immense potential of libraries as public access points on the so-called information superhighway.

Information technology

The emergence of the information superhighway has the potential to transform the role of libraries in our society. The digital highway is a single, interactive system linking telephones, television, cables and computers over optical fibres and other media. It will provide to Australian homes and businesses an extensive range of information services such as pay TV, home shopping, interactive games, video conferencing, open learning, data interchange and community information.

Any communications network capable of transmitting the discrete information units used by computers could become part of the superhighway. These networks include telephone copper wires, coaxial cables, optical fibres, microwave links or even wireless and satellite systems stretching across the globe. Computer networks such as Internet are already on the highway.

The complexity of these technological issues has challenged the capacity of information policy makers in Australia. The fragmentation of responsibilities across the Federal bureaucracy has made difficult the development of a national information policy, as promised by the ALP Platform. For a party and government interested in equity, however, issues of information and access are all important. Politicians understand well the old dictum that information is power. With the information super-



highway emerging as a toll road — where consumers pay capital and user charges to bring sophisticated information into their homes and businesses — lanes of public access should be set aside for those who cannot afford to pay the toll. Otherwise, a new division of social inequity will emerge between the information rich and information poor.

The providers of superhighway products will be corporate combinations of telecommunications carriers, entertainment organisations and computer software manufacturers. Current cross-media standards will become redundant as the technology demands a convergence of ownership and operation. It is essential for the Federal Government to set a policy framework, with safety-net provisions of access and affordability, which anticipates the corporate plans of the big players, especially Murdoch and Packer.

The convergence of technology and ownership could give immense public power to a handful of unelected, unaccountable giants. Information really is power. Two important assets are available to the Federal Government in guaranteeing low income earners access and affordability on the superhighway: Firstly, public authorities such as Telecom and the ABC can play a countervailing role in the public interest. In the absence of a national strategy, however, some inequitable trends are emerging.

In Sydney, for instance, Telecom's installation program for optical fibre and coaxial cables has given priority to the affluent northern and eastern suburbs. Secondly, Australia's extensive network of public education buildings, primarily schools and libraries, offer an opportunity for affordable public access points on the information superhighway.

In the United States, the Clinton administration has set a goal of providing sophisticated interactive communications to every school, library and hospital by the year 2000. It is hoped that advanced telecommunications in public institutions will spur demand for cabling into homes. In turn, the promise of a robust consumer market should provide the telecommunications industry with an incentive to pay to wire public institutions.

Australia has about 13 000 libraries — 10 000 in schools, 200 in higher education institutions, 1300 special libraries and 1500 public libraries. There is no more thorough or better equipped network in Australia, in every suburb and every town, to facilitate public access to electronic information. Already, the best libraries no longer restrict their services to collections. Despite limited resources, they are building their technology and roles as access points: where clients can use workstations, either in the library, at home or at work, and interface with a range of information and learning services.

The development of new information technology in our libraries is basic to some of the oldest values of a free society. That

is, the idea in a democracy that all citizens should have the opportunity of equal access to knowledge. This idea has been integral to the development of public education, rights of freedom of expression and all the best features of meritocracy. Free public libraries were established as a further confirmation of this ideal and through each generation have provided opportunities of equal access to information and learning.

No government should allow private interests on the information superhighway to dim or diminish the role of libraries in Australia. Any one of a combination of four policy measures are available to the Federal Government:

- Duplicating the US National Information Infrastructure with a requirement on private companies to connect public education institutions to the superhighway.
- Building into the user charges of the private sector a special fee, which could then be paid as a cross-subsidy for the establishment of public sector networks and affordable public prices.
- Paying direct government subsidies to assist capital and user costs in libraries. No matter the means of subsidy, cross or direct, the development of information technology services in public libraries cannot be left to the inadequate resources of local government.
- Using public libraries as an outpost for the development of electronic information services by government departments. It is inefficient to establish new information outlets in isolation from each other and ignore the reputation of public libraries as a focus for public information.

As an example, the Attorney-General's Department established in July a database on all Commonwealth legislation through computer terminals in Australian Government bookshops. Every student and every researcher knows that this material would be more accessible and better used on-line in public libraries. Delays with these policy options can only aggravate the key issues of information access and equity. It is too easy in public life to assume that private incomes bring all Australians within reach of the basic tools of transport and communications. Seven per cent of Australian households, or 390 000 homes, do not have a telephone. Thirteen per cent of households, or 740 000, do not own a car. Seventy-six per cent of households, or 4 450 000 homes, do not have a personal computer.

It will be many years before the technology of the superhighway comes into the price range of average Australians, let alone the most disadvantaged. Access to sophisticated information and learning should not be left as a privilege for the wealthy. Good libraries, supported by good governments, can progressively bring these services within the reach of all Australians.

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