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Executive director

May has been a busy month for your Association. The inaugural meetings of the Information Technology Committee and the ALIA Publishing Policy Committees took place. The Federal Government released its budget. Important government announcements were made about the development of community information networks. Library Week was celebrated throughout the country. The Libraries Working Group of the Cultural Ministers' Council met in Melbourne.

My column this month contains a grab-bag of information about some of these issues. Some, such as Library Week, will have to wait for the next issue when we have received reports from around the country. But, if advance publicity is any guide, many Branches, regional groups and individual libraries have embraced the theme of *Destination information* with great initiative and enthusiasm and the reports should make interesting reading.

Cymbals for cybrarians!

It is often depressing to read in our daily newspapers of the apparent stranglehold that computer technicians have over the development of the cliched 'information superhighway'. This is especially the case when we know of the pioneering work that is being done in libraries throughout the country on important aspects of the delivery and management of digitised information. It was therefore pleasing to see recent publicity for special librarians who are providing valuable, if not critical, services for their employers through the management of information systems. Two years ago at the ALIA Asia Pacific Specials, Health and Law Librarians Conference at the Gold Coast we heard a great deal about the work that special librarians were doing in legal, accounting, mining, government and other organisations to ensure that their employers had the competitive

advantage that accurate and timely information brings. ALIA's Special Libraries Section has a range of projects underway which seek to promote the role of its members and which also incorporate specific professional development objectives for special librarians. The program being developed for this year's August Conference, *Synergy in Sydney*, will further demonstrate the important role that librarians play in cyberspace.

Coalitions for public access

'Too often, the information marketplace is considered the sole domain of the industries building the information infrastructure. Librarians and the public interest community simply cannot afford to sit back and let the information infrastructure debate be framed by special interests whose profits depend on the proliferation of entertainment and home shopping.' So said Nancy Kranich, Associate Dean of Libraries at New York University, speaking at last year's Canadian Library Association Conference on the topic 'Forging Coalitions for Public Access'. Indeed, the issues raised by Ms Kranich are the subject of concerted lobbying efforts by library associations around the world.

The establishment of effective and influential coalitions is an integral task in pursuing the goal of equity of access to information in the emerging high technology information environment. To this end ALIA has been busy forging relationships with other library associations, community organisations, other national associations and with government. Regular readers of *inCite* will recall that following our meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, Brian Howe, last year, a number of government initiatives were announced. These embraced policy statements supporting the role of public libraries in providing access to online information and the establishment of ministerial and departmental committees to explore and respond to this goal.

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The Local Government connection

In his opening address to the conference of the Institute of Municipal Management, Mr Howe announced the establishment of a Committee composed of his Department of Housing and Regional Development, ALIA and the Australian Local Government Association. This Committee met for the first time at ALIA House in Canberra on 22 March, its membership enhanced by the inclusion of the Department of Communication and the Arts. ALIA invited ACLIS Executive Officer, Gordon Bower, and the convenor of the Council of Australian Public Library Associations (CAPLA), Barb McLean, to join ALIA Vice President, Helen Tait (State Library of Victoria) and myself to represent the 'library perspective'. The second meeting took place on 1 May.

The first task of the Committee is to clarify its objectives. One key focus arises from the Prime Minister's commitment, expressed in the policy statement *Creative nation*, 'to ensure the maximum public access to the information services becoming available ... In particular, the 1 400 public library service points throughout Australia provide a major opportunity for linking communities to network services, such as those available through the Internet.'

Community information networks

The Federal Government is promoting a number of community information networks with the aim of disseminating government information and establishing an exchange within groups with common interests. One such project is the Department of Social Security's network which will provide free access to government and community information, communication facilities and services through 300 local access points in libraries and community organisations. Another is the recently announced Australian Education

Network which is to be developed by the Department of Employment, Education and Training. The Minister, Simon Crean, said recently that 'for the first time Australia will have a network which will link all schools, TAFE's and universities and other education and training providers across the nation, as well as internationally through a service network and modern technology for interactive communication'. There are a number of other pilot projects based on the cooperative efforts of university, state, school and local government libraries. These include the Hunter Community Network and the ACT project both of which have been profiled in earlier editions of *inCite*. The challenge at this time for projects such as these is to secure the resources they require to continue to develop.

Model development

Through committees such as that established by Brian Howe, work will continue on the development of models for community networks. At its meeting on 1 May the Committee was privileged to meet with Dr Veronica Lunn who had recently



Virginia Walsh and Veronica Lunn

returned from a study tour to evaluate community networks in Canada, the United States of America and Great Britain. Veronica, Manager of Libraries, Information and Cultural Services at Lake Macquarie City in New South Wales, is, along with Bill Linklater (Newcastle University) and Chris Williams (Newcastle Public Library), managing the Hunter project. The Mainerd Scholarship which Veronica was awarded recently, allowed her the wonderful opportunity to study models overseas and she has brought back a wealth of information which will be of value to all parties involved in establishing networks here in Australia.

ALIA's Federal electoral strategy — The politics of politics!

Libertarianism was a powerful and influential social and political movement in Sydney during the 1950s and 1960s which enunciated principles of social anarchy and had as its slogan 'Whomever you vote for, a politician always gets in'. Conventional politics, to these Libertarians, represented a

form of il-liberalism where the pluralistic nature of society was subsumed by the authoritarian interests of the state, and they believed that the representatives of special interest groups, purporting to solve the ills of society, serve to covertly advance authoritarian interests.

For the cynical amongst us it remains true that whomever we vote for, a politician always gets in. What we, in our Federal Electoral Strategy, are trying to ensure is that the politician who gets in is well briefed on the important role that libraries play in our society. So, while we continue to deal in the world of conventional politics that so upset the Sydney Libertarians, to ignore the power of our parliaments is akin to tossing the baby out with the bath water. We must play the game of gaining political influence and play it well.

It is important to remind ourselves that we are not involved in partisan politics. We are not supporting any political party or faction, but rather attempting to ensure that support for our causes is carefully established and remains capable of mobilisation should an issue arise which strikes at the heart of the library community's interests.

Advocacy seminars

One of the very important initiatives to emerge from the recent meeting of ALIA Branch Presidents in Canberra was to establish a seminar series which would be run in each major metropolitan centre to familiarise members with the key aspects of the advocacy process. At this stage it is envisaged that the seminars would involve journalists with experience in local and federal politics, a marketing/advocacy specialist, members of the library community with lobbying experience and a representative of the ALIA National Office. The aim is to ensure that as many members as possible are familiar with the tools of successful lobbying and are comfortable with the Association's Federal Electoral Strategy. The seminars will also provide members with valuable advice on the management of local lobbying activities and tips on promoting individual libraries and information services. Further details of this seminar series will be published in *inCite* and available from Branch Councils.■



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