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A month of effort... is it enough?

From the time of my writing to the time of your reading, there will have been an immense amount of effort going into political persuasion all round the country. Politicians of all hues have been trying to persuade the voters that they alone have the right answers for the future. Those voters in turn, gathered into a wide variety of organizations and special interest groups, have been trying to persuade the politicians to make commitments to their chosen cause. Political analysts and media pundits have been trying to persuade us all that they know the answers. By about the time you read this, we will all know one answer — which will determine many others.

What will all that effort have achieved for ALIA and libraries? Will that month of effort count for much in the long term? At the risk of offending all those ALIA members who have put so much work into their local lobbying efforts, I think the answer is no. It will not count for much on its own.

If we have been successful in gaining formal commitment on library issues from the major political parties, it is not because we have threatened to take our votes elsewhere in the last month, but because of earlier work done to make them aware of the role and value of libraries and to emphasise how libraries can contribute to the achievement of stated government goals.

In my January column, I talked about the *Lobby for Libraries* program and urged that we should all apply ourselves to developing long-term strategic alliances and to acquiring the skills we need to develop and support them. One of the benefits of establishing long term political relationships at the federal state and local member level is that when we are given five weeks notice of an election, we are already half way there, with our role, values and needs already well known, and with a relationship with politicians already established to build on.

But strategic alliances mean much more than just having friends in court when it comes to the four yearly political frenzy. We need to consciously identify groups, organisations and individuals with shared interests and goals with whom we can combine efforts at a range of levels. It might be a public library teaming up with a computer inter-

est group to run an internet awareness program, or better still add a computer supplier and/or an internet access provider to the team to provide the equipment and other resources as well. It might be a school system teaming up with a publisher to produce materials designed to directly support curricula. It might be a special librarian setting up an information exchange with a specialist information provider whose resources she needs. It should also include becoming much more lateral in our thinking about who our strategic allies might be.

At the VALA conference in January two of the overseas keynote speakers commented in their closing remarks on their impression of partnerships in the Australian profession. Klaus-Dieter Lehmann from the Deutsche Bibliothek had been struck by the fact that the Australian profession took a functional approach, well-integrated across institutions, and that there was an unusually high level of cross-sectoral understanding.

Walt Crawford from the United States Research Libraries Group talked about the need to demonstrate quality services — good service helps generate more funding which provides better service which helps generate more funding. He emphasised the importance of many strategic alliances and the importance of understanding and reflecting stakeholder values. His impression was that Australian public libraries in particular are doing that well.

Are they? I hope the good impression gained by our overseas colleagues was a realistic one. I have the feeling that it would have been enhanced by reflection on the ideal services and circumstances portrayed in conference presentations, but I certainly agree that it is critical to be constantly aware of our strategic partners on all sides — funders, politicians, potential sponsors, related institutions and importantly, members of the user community, and to be working at sound ongoing relationships built on mutual benefit. Consciously developing and building a wide range of strategic partnerships is the real secret of good lobbying.

On the political front, after an election when the field is clearer is a good time to be working on those long term relationships. Do not sit back. Go to it. ■