

# Advocacy at work

Virginia Walsh, ALIA executive director

As we lurched into election mode recently I was reminded of the story Fred Daly used to tell about a well-known politician who, out on the hustings, walked around a crowd of supporters shaking hands and making small-talk. He came upon an acquaintance and asked after his father. 'He died a few years back' was the response. The politician continued on his rounds shaking hands until he returned to the old acquaintance. 'How's your father' asked the politician. 'Still dead' came the reply.

It is easy to fall into the trap of becoming cynical about our politicians — especially at election time. Promises abound and we ask ourselves how long it will be before these assurances will be forgotten. The pace of campaigning is reckless. The election dominates the media coverage. We can not wait for it to be over.

Election time does however present great opportunities for advocacy. Sitting members and new candidates are very accessible during this time and it represents a great chance for us to raise the profile of our Association and ensure that issues of concern to us are firmly on the political agenda. ALIA's Electoral Action Strategy is an organised program of meetings with candidates in as broad a range of electorates as possible. Our members have used this election period to provide candidates with information about Australia's libraries and the important role they perform in our society. Candidates have been reminded of their party commitments to freedom of information and the need to make electronic information easily accessible to the community. They have been asked to con-

template the role of libraries in the education of our children and in life-long learning for all members of our society. Libraries service businesses to provide competitive advantage. They perform a social role as a focus for recreational activities. They are critical to our continued evolution as a fair and well-informed democratic society. Libraries deserve to be supported.

The role of a national association is highly political but it is not partisan. We must remember to reach out to those candidates who represent the non-government parties, especially if there is a good chance that those candidates will be influential in the next government.

*inCite* readers will be familiar with Prime Minister Keating's recent *Innovation statement* and the promise of \$11.4 million for our public libraries which was to be made available during the 1996/97 financial year. If the Labor Party is successful in the March elections the process of allocating these funds is already underway. As this edition of *inCite* goes to press the Liberal/National Coalition has announced similar funding support. The ALIA Electoral Strategy and advocacy in recent times has sought to encourage such a commitment by the opposition parties.

Jim Killen, long-serving Liberal Federal Parliamentarian and colleague of the already mentioned Labor Parliamentarian Fred Daly, once wrote (as part of a tribute to Fred Daly) that 'the cynic looks upon political conflict as a dark, tawdry involvement attracting only those of shallow and mean ambition. Happily he is far from the truth.' The progress of this campaign has had its darker moments but, in the main, candidates of all political persuasions have shown an enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the role of libraries. The dedication of some is clearly greater than others. Our task is to make our issues clear to as many as possible so that the library and information sector attracts the regard and attention it deserves.

By the time you read this article the 2 March election outcome may well be known. Our lobbying efforts will continue. Hopefully many of our politicians will be better informed about library issues thanks to the efforts of our members working in the electorates. We look forward to continued success with our advocacy campaigns whatever the outcome. ■

## Coalition announces \$11.4 million for public libraries

The Coalition's Arts Policy, *For arts sake — a fair go*, was released in Melbourne on 8 February. The policy includes \$11.4 million 'to enable public libraries and similar institutions to function as community access points for on-line services...' Also announced was \$10 million for a National Cultural Network '...to assist in the cost of digitising the national collection.'

These initiatives paralleled those announced by Labor in the *Innovation statement* in December 1995. ALIA welcomes the financial commitment from all of the major political parties and looks forward to on-going support from the federal sphere of Government.