



## Are libraries cultural institutions?

On the evening of 12 May, at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, a celebration was held as part of activities for national Library and Information Week. The great debate: 'Are libraries cultural institutions?' was jointly hosted by Mary Teague, director of the Northern Territory Library and Information Services (NTLIS) and Robin Hempel, convenor of ALIA Top End. The audience comprised an interesting cross-section of the Top End community and the lively, festive atmosphere was reflected in the colourful display of tropical flowers and balloons featuring this year's theme, *Power your mind*.

In opening the event, the Honourable John Ah Kit, Minister for Libraries, reflected on this theme. As a bare footed child running around the Parap camp, 'Who could have imagined ... that I would ever even have contemplated becoming a parliamentary representative?' Briefly, he shared the moving personal story of his search for knowledge. While mentioning the importance of books and print resources in libraries, he also stressed the benefits of library services supplying information access through electronic resources, especially in remote and isolated regions.

He then opened the debate by challenging the two expert teams to reflect on the changing and sometimes confusing image of libraries in the 21st Century. This was the cue for chairperson, Mary Teague to welcome the adjudicator, Mike Dillon, chief executive officer of the Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs, and the timekeeper, Bill Constantine, NTLIS. Mary then introduced the debating panel, 'an eclectic mix of Territory personalities'. Members of the affirmative team were Elizabeth Desailly, head of school, Hospitality and Tourism and Palmerston Campus manager Northern Territory University; Isaac Brown, associate professor, Faculty of Indigenous Research and Education at Northern Territory University and Gerry Wood, MLA for Nelson. The negative team featured Sue Oliver, director Legal Policy Division, NT Department of Justice; Noel Padgam, former MLA, currently goat farmer; and NT writer and historian, Peter Forrest.

A lively, passionate and humorous exchange ensued with the final word going to Mike Dillon, adjudicator. In a serious tone, highly appropriate to his role, Mike succinctly summed up the performance of the two teams. He pointed out that unfortunately, on both sides, there had been a quite misguided, yet relentless attempt to define culture by a rush to the dictionary. This had resulted in the employment of faulty logic, very much at the expense of rational argument. The result was that the negative team had scored the winning point. However, in keeping with the tone of the evening, the third negative speaker had unexpectedly spoken out to champion the cause of libraries, thereby changing sides and upsetting the balance. So the affirmative argument, 'That libraries are cultural institutions' had finally prevailed!

**Robin Hempel, convenor, ALIA Top End**

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