

The Pollyanna perspective



Geraldine Barkworth

Bold Women Big Ideas



Roxanne Missingham

Australian Parliamentary Librarian, Canberra

The newish Australian Parliamentary Librarian (January 2006) is Roxanne Missingham, an advocate of the need for ongoing critical review and change. She tells work/life balance coach Geraldine Barkworth, how taking a 'Pollyanna perspective' is a useful career move, especially when it's time for libraries to communicate and re-define their role.

You are often referred to as the Pollyanna of the library world. What does 'Pollyanna' mean to you?

Jan Fullerton referred to me as Pollyanna and I guess it seems to fit! I try to see the best in things – particularly to see benefits in using technology to enable us to put our people into more interesting jobs, and to try to put things into perspective! Having a Pollyanna side means that sometimes, I think, the day-to-day knockbacks when things don't always happen on time, or on budget, or it seems that there is always a pressure to reduce costs, can be accepted philosophically and we can emphasise what we have achieved. I think libraries play a really important role in society and our clients are often quite good at valuing this, even if it doesn't translate into more money. My Pollyanna side also has other advantages – for example, I always think things can change or that we can do things differently. Interestingly, one of my friends said, when they heard I was moving to the Parliamentary Library, that it would be fine – I would just have to tell people what a wonderful job the library did and then the dollars would flow. My response was, that I needed to make sure that we were delivering the right sort of services and that we were moving forwards to use technology to meet the changing needs of users, rather than just saying that the library was delivering a fantastic service – although it is.

You are a strong advocate of reaching out within (and without) your organisation to ask for help and collaboration. What have you learnt from taking this approach?

I love creating community – we all have so much we can learn from each other. I believe we need to look outside of libraries and examine different models of success and 'unsuccess' and see what we can learn from both. Otherwise there's a real danger of insularity. Taking on challenges and seeking opportunities is something that I would encourage all my colleagues to do. I have found it terrific to build up a knowledge of skills from working in a variety of libraries (and for a time, in IT). There is nothing like moving outside libraries to give you a perspective on what a wonderful community we have, and the co-operation and sharing which is just a part of how we do things. Moving out of libraries for a while also gave me a more critical eye about

our services and attitudes. It's really important to consider all new opportunities (there goes Pollyanna again) and to say that while we may have been doing something the same way for many years, the needs of our clients and the options we have to deliver the service, may create the need for some changes.

Is there enough creative, visionary thinking going on in the library world?

I think it's interesting to reflect that libraries were really adopters of the web – in Canberra, of the first dozen or so sites, most either had library content (as did the gophers) or were created by libraries. We have lost that edge over the past decade, and need to reinvent ourselves as the service point of choice. I think that thinking through the client's perspective is terribly important. I think I did my first client survey around 15 years ago, and found that they valued different things to the library staff. While we were collection-oriented, clients wanted rapid and high quality advice, and focused on the resources we could make available, particularly from other libraries. I think it's very important we get out of our shoes and into theirs to challenge ourselves. I sometimes hear librarians saying 'We just need to make clients have lots and lots of training to be able to use our services' (and I have been guilty of saying this too). I should say here that two people who have particularly been inspirational in challenging me (and others) to look at this attitude are Jan Fullerton, (Director General, NLA, and Jasmine Cameron, Assistant Director General, Executive and Co-ordination Support, NLA. I always say that we will know when we are successful, when our users do a Google search and the first hit is written by a librarian. We need to appear where our users appear – "we have to step into the shoes of the user" and not send them to re-education camps.

How can librarians initiate and build closer, influential relationships within their organisation?

An important question for us all is, 'How can we expect people to understand what we do, if we don't communicate to them in their language?' We need to talk about how we help them find resources, rather than our technical cataloguing and indexing processes. We need to go into their space and understand their priorities – which at the Parliamentary Library are different to many other libraries, here our clients want confidentiality, speed and accuracy – possibly in that order. I have learned that a good way to be successful is to reach out and understand what's going on around you in your organisation, community or sector. And sometimes this means late nights, going to events where you don't know anyone and asking lots of questions. I find there is a higher

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degree of passion in the library profession than in many others; but this passion needs to be communicated beyond the library world in a language that non-librarians can understand.

When a library service feels under siege, it can be difficult to see the beauty of the forest for the ugliness of the tree loppers. All you can see is the chainsaw getting closer and closer... How can a librarian keep feeling positive enough to spot the opportunities rather than just see the challenges?

ALIA could help here. I'm a fan of the 'Find A Friend' support networks where you can get together and exchange ideas. Tonight I'm hosting around 25 New Generation librarians at the Parliamentary Library. We'll show them around, give them plenty of chances to connect and build community. Senator Kate Lundy will speak and ALIA Executive Director, Sue Hutley will also be there. I am constantly energised and inspired when I see the group of new librarians and library professionals that are with us now. They are really challenging us to take new paths and directions – and are wonderful people!

What's your vision for libraries in Australia?

I would love to see libraries recognised as the place supporting communities and learning – with a national support system. The National Library does a fabulous job with limited resources (yes really), but we all need to work together on the big issues, such as a national licence for full text electronic resources. Only if we all communicate to our stakeholders and influential folks how important it is, can we work towards a nationally funded model. We all need to take some responsibility in contributing to achieving a national agenda rather than saying, 'why doesn't someone...?' I think this is why I ran for Vice-president of ALIA. It's a great pleasure and privilege to be on the Board and to work closely with Dagmar Schmidmaier. I feel I have a lot to learn and that I can do this best by participating and actively contributing on issues such as changing ALIA's governance arrangements.

You'll be ALIA's Vice-president in 2006/07 – congratulations. What do you intend for this role?

As Vice-president I will be working on governance issues, but what I really hope to make a major contribution to is ALIA's advocacy agenda. One of the major achievements last year was the Digital Amnesia Conference – which put access to online government publications on the map. We had a broad range of speakers who agreed that there really is a problem with Australian citizens not being able to freely access government documents. The conference was written up in *The Australian* newspaper, making access a broader public debate, not just one restricted to librarians sharing their concerns with each other. Next, we need to follow through and advocate for public libraries, social equity and investment. The Roads To Recovery Program is a terrific model for funding regional project infrastructure. And it's a great name. There's a real parallel need for setting up infrastructure for electronic resources – I would love to see something similar for libraries.

What kind of long-term impact would there be on Australia if libraries were 'done away with'?

Well, sometimes it does seem like we are already living with 'death by five thousand cuts'. Why is \$90M spent on internet filtering rather than good quality internet content? If they got rid of libraries – Australia would rapidly become a third world country. Libraries represent learning, education, community and investment in a healthy future.

How do you look after yourself to maintain a healthy balance between work and home commitments?

I think that I am not on my own when I say it's not completely well balanced. Though our children have now all finished

Year 12 (yes, the only thing worse than one child in Year 12 is twins in Year 12) there is a bit more time, some more evenings out and I have taken up aqua-robics with a passion. Being fitter gives me a bit more positive energy and a great new group of friends to work out with.

What are you currently reading?

I have just read the latest Janet Evanovich. I am a member of a book reading group, which helps me read material I would not select myself – I am now a fan of magic realism. I quite like escapist fun stories – murders, thrillers and suspense. And I have taken up reading Stephen King; what a great writer!

Which words best describe you?

One question that Vic Elliott (University Librarian, Australian National University) asks at interviews – we were on an interview panel together recently – is "What three words do you think best describe you?" For me, it would be energy, desire to achieve (in all sorts of settings) and a passion for excellence (particularly through critical review and change).

Roxanne can be contacted at roxanne.missingham@aph.gov.au.

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Geraldine Barkworth, transformative career coach, offers a 3 hour workshop called How To Be A Relaxed Overachiever – reconnect with your own big picture, as a satellite event with NLS2006, Sydney, 30th November 2006. Register by 30th October by contacting her at geraldine@boldwomenbigideas.com.au or 02 6685 1917.

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