



Jan Richards
ALIA President

Feedback to your Board of Directors

Board members welcome your comments and feedback. Please feel free to contact a Board member at any time.

Email: feedback@alia.org.au with your comments.

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"How many is too many?"

That is the question ALIA Executive Director Sue Hutley and I posed at the 2009 Peak Bodies Forum in May. Since 2002, the National Library of Australia has convened Peak Bodies Forum, a coming together of representatives from the 10 key Australian library organisations. The purpose of the meeting is to identify significant issues facing the Australian library sector and to develop a broad national agenda to address those issues that participants agree upon.

'How many what?', you ask. The answer: library associations in Australia. When you tell people how many associations currently exist, you will see their jaw visibly drop. Take a look at the ALIA links page and I bet you'll be surprised – there are currently 50 and counting: <http://www.alia.org.au/links/organisations.html>. Invariably people rationalise the inclusions: 'that's really a special interest group' or 'they're different because...'. Just as invariably, however, someone always adds 'but you haven't included...'. This list includes many organisations who are ALIA's valued and respective partners, but from an outsider's perspective there are a lot of voices. Is it any wonder that a politician recently asked me, "Who are all these people?"

Already I can sense the hairs rising on the back of some of your necks, so let me assure you that this is not an ALIA grab for power, but an appeal for us to undertake a realistic evaluation of the situation, to have the conversation about how we can work more profitably together. The impact of the economic climate and the resultant decision on where people will put their membership dollar, our ageing and overstretched volunteer base, combined with changing member expectations, make this well-timed. All of our organisations have incredible expertise, loyalty, and goodwill – let's build on that, not lose it.

We're not alone in asking this question. Writing on *Blue Avocado*, a website for the American not-for-profit sector, Elizabeth Heath reflects: "In my community there are two organisations with nearly the same name. They have nearly the same mission and the major fundraising event for each is almost a carbon copy of the other. Yet they won't talk to each other. The boards of each point to the other and say 'we'll cooperate with you if you'll do things right' (translate 'our way')." <http://www.blueavocado.org/print/342>

Sound familiar? Those who know my background will doubtless say, 'she's talking about public libraries'. While that may have been true 12 months ago, my exposure to the wider Australian library community during my time as Vice-President has demonstrated that no sector is immune. Our profession is built on cooperation but we just don't seem to be able to get this right.

We all know the old adage that elephants have long memories. Believe me librarians can out-grudge a pachyderm any day! There is a perception that some of our professional associations were formed because ALIA had its eye off the ball, and there is doubtless some truth in this. I would be the first to agree that, as aggravating as competition can be, it also drives

innovation and excellence. However I believe that it is time to draw a line in the sand and say we start from here.

The seven Australian public library associations began this journey in 2007 when, in a spirit of cooperation, they signed a Memorandum of Collaboration. In the interim, as PLASSOC, they have met and worked towards shared goals including the forthcoming ALIA Public Libraries Summit. Not all in the garden has been rosy, but there is a new spirit of 'together we can succeed'.

At its meeting on 20 May 2009, the ALIA Board endorsed a new Standing Committee, which will be called the ALIA National Partnerships Standing Committee. This will advise the Board on sectoral issues and facilitate the cross-fertilisation of ideas. If we are willing, this committee, together with the Peak Bodies Forum and initiatives such as PLASSOC, can give us a focused way forward.

I believe that the time to have this discussion is now. Like many things that are worthwhile, it won't be easy and it will involve compromise. I don't pretend to know the answer; that will very much depend on you. What I do know is that it will take a while to get it right. Let's leave our egos at the door.

I'll be interested to hear what you have to say.

This month's *inCite* has a focus on Library Technicians. At the meeting of the NSW Marketing Group last week, we discussed the various ways in which Library and Information Week had been celebrated. As usual Carolyn Bourke from Fairfield Library in Sydney's west gave us a 'must copy' idea. (My own library's 'Reading Bingo' featured in last month's *inCite* was inspired by Fairfield). There they marked Library Technicians Day by sending the LT in charge of each branch a home-baked cake. In the name of equity, the cooks all used the same recipe – what stars!

Have a happy new financial year.

Jan

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