

The end of free library services?

There's a certain touch of irony in the fact that as Australian Library Week draws to a close, North Sydney residents will be asked to vote on an issue that could mean the end of free library services, not just for the North Sydney, but much further afield.

On 24 September 1983, North Sydney Council will hold a compulsory referendum about its library service, in conjunction with the NSW local government elections. Residents of North Sydney will be asked:

Should North Sydney Council revoke the Library Act 1939 in order that a scale of fees and charges can be levied for the use of library services?

The Stanton Library (North Sydney's municipal library) has long been the subject of fierce debate by Council - on one side strongly defended as one of the best libraries in the State, on the other criticised for its expenditure (7.64% of the rates in 1982), its non-resident usage (North Sydney is the fifth largest commercial centre in Australia), and its specialist architecture collection (which is its responsibility as a participant in the Sydney Subject Specialisation Scheme).

The 'anti-library' faction, led by Alderman Michael Fitzpatrick, is in favour of fees for use of the library, particularly for non-residents. Non-residents comprise 42% of library membership, but North Sydney receives a State Government Special Grant in recognition of this disability. The 'pro-library' faction, led by the Mayor, Alderman Ted Mack, favours free libraries. To date the Council has been independent of party politics, but at the next elections endorsed Liberal Party candidates will be standing.

Under the NSW Library Act, fees for user membership cannot be charged, and the library Council of NSW has recently circumscribed local councils with a reinforced statement of principle to this effect. North Sydney Council is therefore seeking to revoke its adoption of the Act, which can only be done by referendum.

The referendum is more than a local issue. If it succeeds, or even if it is not defeated by a large majority, it could have implications for many other local authorities within the State, or even further afield. Stanton Library staff are, of course, totally opposed to the referendum, but as employees of Council they are unable to be overtly involved in any election campaign, so they



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are endeavouring to remain impartial, though most are sporting T-shirts with 'Let Libraries Run Free' emblazoned on the front.

Concerned citizens have established the 'Keep Stanton Free Committee' under the chairmanship of Peter Bridges, (02) 922 3335. The committee has published a pamphlet, which is being distributed from a stand outside the library on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and on local market days. The pamphlet is also being letter-dropped and a bumper sticker, Keep Stanton Free - Vote No, is being distributed.

The NSW branch of the LAA, in conjunction with the NSW Association of Local Government Librarians will hold a public meeting on 21 September. Speakers are: Richard Hall, Chairman of the Library Council, George Negus of Channel 9's current affairs programme '60 Minutes', and Peter Tranter, the retiring Deputy Mayor of North Sydney and Vice-chairman of Council's Library Committee.

Other public librarians are assisting in the fight by manning the stand outside the library, by letter-dropping, by staffing polling booths on election day, and by contributing financially towards printing and other costs.

What's happening elsewhere?

In Holland only readers of 17 years or younger may borrow free of charge from public Libraries. There are special rates for the over-65s but all other users will have to pay either in the form of an annual subscription, a lending charge for each book or a combination of both. Local public libraries

may choose from these options. This change was brought about by the Dutch Ministry of Welfare and Culture in a move that certainly does not seem to have had the welfare and community culture of the community at heart, and is, as Margreet Wijnstroom of IFLA, says, 'a sad moment in the history of the Dutch public library movement'.

The same question has also arisen in England where Councillor Kenneth Rose of Sutton Borough Council has been supporting library charges, saying that they would bring about a better and more efficient service. The 'Comment' column of the *Library Association Record* comments that the pressure for privatisation of libraries would, if successful, put information beyond the reach of those who cannot pay. They continue:

The penny-pinching spirit, fostering the emergence of an information-elite, is shameful by comparison with countries like Australia, where everything is free.

Although most of us may not have noticed that 'everything is free' in Australia, let us at least preserve the spirit of democracy and keep libraries and their services free to everyone living in this country.

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