

Front Line



Bev Kirby
ALIA President

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THE PRESIDENT of ALIA has a wonderful opportunity to make some special contribution to the Association and its members. Those of us who have held that office spend a year almost entirely devoted to living, working and breathing for the Association, I am certain that all of us would agree that the experience changes us in some special way. For me that change has been dramatic, quite unexpected and at times, quite disturbing and I know I am very thankful for it.

I began my year as President claiming an open mind about most things while unashamedly pushing my barrow on a few major issues like ALIA's role as watchdog against employment groups identifying our skills and doing it badly. Through *inCite* you will know of my concern with skills in lobbying. You will know that I believed in ALIA as the only body to represent the profession. These are important and will remain so.

Coming from a commercial background, I had never envisaged that I would become single-minded about the dangers of user-pays. I now believe totally in free access to libraries that serve the Australian community. I believe that we need a Bill of Information Rights to protect the right of every Australian to information to support educational, social and cultural needs and aspirations.

Conference participants in Albury-Wodonga heard in my Presidential address of my concern at escalation of funding cuts and user pays as a philosophy to balance the budget. I regret that many of my colleagues are in a position where as managers they see themselves in conflict with our philosophy of free access for all. I fear that those ideals of social justice and equity that took history so long to realise may be destroyed overnight by someone who hasn't thought it through.

Following the ALIA Conference I was a guest of the New Zealand Library Association (now the New Zealand Library and Information Association) at their conference in Nelson. Their conference was inspiring. They had chosen to meet in workshops to look at issues facing libraries and the library profession in New Zealand. They did the impossible, bringing over 400 people together from all levels of the profession and from all corners of the country.

There was feeling of ownership of the conference outcomes and a feeling of pride in having worked together to achieve them.

We had met 12 of our Kiwi colleagues at Albury-Wodonga and we had shared something of the spirit of bi-culturalism in that contact. There were a number of Australians in Wellington and each of us were participants in activities which sought to identify and celebrate the opportunity to meet the challenge of Pakeha and Maori cultures working together. Sue Pharo, President of the New Zealand Library and Information Association in her Presidential address talked about libraries perpetuating the 'dominant cultural trends in our society'.

I came back with questions about the role of our profession in Australia's multi-culturalism and for me these are also questions of access and equity. I know that the 1994 Conference in Wellington will give us a chance to look at some of those issues with our colleagues across the Tasman.

Along with bi-culturalism the New Zealanders assigned a high priority to actions under the heading of 'information justice' and 'free access to public libraries'. One of those actions was to be an 'Bill of Information Rights'.

Our colleagues in New Zealand have been fighting policy makers who look at charging for library services in a society which has steadily embraced the concept of user-pays. The free access conference resolution was a response to many years of conflict and concern. Some of the dominant cultural trends in our libraries seem to be ideas of access by the fittest or in other words, access by those who can afford it. That is the only message of user-pays.

I see in the 1994 joint conference in Wellington an opportunity to focus on the Bill of Information Rights. Perhaps we may look to a joint statement endorsed by both nations. I give notice that I will be working through ALIA to achieve this outcome. It is only through a Bill of Rights that we can protect our ideals in freedom to read, our support for literacy, libraries and multiculturalism and our policy on library services to people with disabilities. It is only with such a Bill that we can protect our libraries from a return to the kind of libraries we saw in the old Mechanic's Institutes we read about in the history books.

Thank you for my year as President and for your support. ■