

National Front demands access to right-wing material, Bishop burns books

Alex Byrne, chair IFLA Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression committee

In the New Norcia Library Lecture, presented on 17 September 1998, I noted that the enormous population movements of the one-hundred-and-fifty years have created a pluralistic world in which many faiths, races and languages intermingle, a world in which tolerance is crucial, a world in which respect for human rights is fundamental. These considerations challenge libraries and library workers.

The fundamental human rights are expressed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the fiftieth anniversary of which we celebrate this year, and particularly Article 19 on freedom of expression and of access to information. Article 19 expresses the right which librarians must hold most dear, the right which is at the very heart of librarianship:

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

In respecting human rights, we must be tolerant of others, gloriously enjoying diversity and seeking to appreciate the beliefs and opinions of others. Expecting our views to be respected, we must respect those of others.

Western societies place extremely high value on individual autonomy while other societies place greater stress on community and social cohesion. Dr Mahathir, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, may be quite correct in suggesting that 'our Asian values ... will be even more relevant for our men and women as they search for their own niche and identities in a borderless environment' but that does not justify the suppression of individual liberty, the abrogation of human rights. It does not justify the control of the media we have seen in recent weeks since the dismissal of Dr Mahathir's deputy and protégé, Anwar Ibrahim.

The human rights expressed in the Universal Declaration are fundamental. They provide a foundation for individual liberty. Their expression may differ from country to country, society to society. In some, they may be more brashly, more stridently, displayed; in others, they will be more subtly expressed within a community bound by strong religious or cultural ties. Never-

theless they are universal in asserting the right of the individual to be respected and to be able to choose how to live his or her life.

What is the rôle of libraries in such a world? Is it simply to provide the information requested and to suppress that which is not favoured? In responding to the views of the societies and organisations in which they have been established, should libraries accept that some information may be restricted or even suppressed? Is it possible to adopt a tolerant and sensitive recognition of diversity while holding fast to a commitment to preserve and provide access to the documentary record?

A few recent examples might help us explore these questions:

- Last year, the National Front won power in a number of municipalities in the south of France. The newly elected councils demanded that their libraries should cease to offer 'left wing' publications, including some daily newspapers, but should offer instead publications associated with the National Front. In the ensuing furore, the libraries were accused of 'left wing' bias, the councils arguing that they were advocating balance. The matter has calmed somewhat since the libraries showed that they could not cancel the newspapers as they had long-term subscription contracts and also agreed to stock the publications sympathetic to the National Front. It has not, however, gone away.
- Earlier this year, a student at the University of Central England, in Birmingham, took photographs of illustrations in a book on the eminent photographer Mapplethorpe which had been published by Jonathan Cape. She dropped the film off for developing at a pharmacy. The shopkeeper decided the photographs were obscene, informed the police, who demanded the book from the University and subsequently laid an information with the Office of Criminal Prosecutions. It is not clear whether a prosecution will be brought against the University or the student.
- Two months ago, at Yekaterinberg in Russia, books by modern philosophers were burnt by order of the bishop who was evidently alarmed

by developments in modern Russia.

- In Afghanistan, the Taliban are driving women from public life, denying them individual human rights, including the rights to access information and to speak out in such areas as their own health.
- In Indonesia, there has been a heartening improvement in access to information and freedom of expression since the resignation of former President Suharto. Several journals have resumed publication and details of the atrocities in Aceh are being circulated. For those with the resources and language skills to access them, the internet and satellite television services provide ready access to information from other countries. But there are still limits on both freedom of expression and access to information, particularly for the poor and those outside the main centres. The current currency and economic crisis will render it impossible for all but a few libraries to purchase overseas publications.
- Among the books censored in public and school libraries in the USA in 1996 were Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex*, John Grisham's *The Client*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, AM Homes's *Jack* and Kevin O'Malley's *Froggy Went A-Courtin'*. The most common reason was 'conflicts with the values of the community'.
- Closer to home, Western Australia and the Northern Territory have enacted legislation to impose penalties on those who make 'objectionable' (undefined) material available to minors via the internet. The responsibility is placed primarily on the delivery channel.

We could, perhaps, imagine the first example happening in Australia if a similar extremist party came to power, perhaps Pauline Hanson's One Nation. Would our librarians have the courage to resist a duly elected council or government? Could we imagine a book being seized from a university library? Would it be acceptable if the contents were as confronting as are Mapplethorpe's photographs? What might we (do we?) exclude from our school libraries? Why would we do it: because a parent did not find the novel

'proper to be in the library due to the language' as in the case of *Jack*? Surely we would not burn books, would we? Might we stop girls obtaining information on their sexuality and contraception? Can we imagine a school or public library being prosecuted for permitting young students to access pornographic images via the internet?

In an interconnected world free flow of information becomes the only option. Its power has been well demonstrated in the striking images from Beijing's Tienanmen Square, the Berlin Wall and, latterly, Jakarta. But it is not just a matter for brave, or foolhardy, journalists. It is our business, as librarians, to ensure that free flow of information. We must ensure that the writings of such authors as Pramoetja Ananta Toer are available (however discomfiting they may be to those in power), that the women of Kabul can access health information, and that students in every country have the resources to learn.

IFLA and FAIFE

Dealing with these matters is a complex issue when we seek to address it at a national level. At an international level, it becomes even more difficult. Not only do we need to achieve a social compact within a community which has agreed to live together but we need to find a dialogue between competing ideologies, faiths and values. We cannot arrogantly assume that our values are universal, imposing them on others, but nor can we dismiss individual freedom with amorphous concepts such as 'Asian values'. Although we will not always agree, we can find common ground as professionals in addressing the issues facing librarianship, not least in the areas of access to information and freedom of expression.

In this rôle, as navigators through the world of information, both traditional and electronic, we have a re-

sponsibility. It is a responsibility to ensure that all our clients can and may obtain the information they want.

IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, has responded to this professional challenge. After two years of background investigation, in August 1997 it established FAIFE, the committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, which I have the honour to chair. We have been fortunate that the Danish library community has funded the establishment of an office to support this work.

The period of investigation identified the following broad issues:

- to provide and protect the right of every individual to have access to needed information;
- the development of libraries in order to bridge the information gap between the information rich and the information poor;
- intellectual freedom including the protection of library materials and personnel from censorship.

The mission of the FAIFE committee and office is, as stated in the resolution adopted at the Copenhagen General Conference in 1997,

...to advise IFLA on matters of international significance to libraries and librarianship in regard to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, including, but not limited to:

- *censorship of library materials,*
- *ideological, economic, political or religious pressures resulting in limitations on access to information in libraries, or restrictions on librarians and other information specialists who provide reference and other information services.*

The priorities within this work are to:

1. Promote freedom of access to information and freedom of expression as

fundamental human rights which are vital cornerstones of the mission of libraries to be gateways to knowledge in support of human rights, peace, democracy and development.

2. Be the leading organisation in responding to attacks and limitations on libraries and librarians, seeking the support and assistance of other organisations as appropriate.
3. Support and assist other organisations which are addressing other relevant issues which may indirectly affect libraries and librarians.

The work has started. The office opened on 1 July 1998 and we held the first meetings of the new committee in August. The members of the committee will be augmented with nominees from under-represented areas and a worldwide network of rapporteurs will be established. We are developing contacts with related organisations such as Article 19, PEN International, Index on Censorship, and Amnesty International. Policies and procedures are being created. We will build on the excellent work of those international bodies and such library organisations as the American Library Association's long standing and admirable Office for Intellectual Freedom.

This is developing a peak international body to deal with the issues of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression which impinge on libraries and information services. But this will not be enough. The work of our committee will need to be supported, morally, practically and financially by library and information workers, organisations and associations throughout the world. Each of us needs to articulate the indivisible right

... to freedom of expression... freedom to hold opinions without interference and [freedom] to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. ■

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