

Exploring themes



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Each month we try to select a topical theme for *inCite*. This month we have chosen the internal design of libraries. The stories on the following pages, about libraries in different sectors and geographical locations, demonstrate the importance of input from library staff and users as well as from architects and planners if library designs are to be successful. In future issues of *inCite* you can look forward to reading about a diverse range of issues including the year 2000 computer problem (the 'millennium bug'), libraries providing services to businesses, marketing and promotion for libraries, use of Internet filtering software and workplace and education matters. If you have a particular theme that you would like to see explored in more detail please let us know. The *inCite* editor would appreciate your input.

1998 — election year?

Given the probable approach of a federal election it is timely to provide an overview of what is happening on the national political scene. During late February the ACT electors went to the polls to select their new representatives to sit in the Legislative Assembly. As I write, polling day is still a week away, but the political scribes are predicting a return to power for Kate Carnell and her Canberra Liberals.

Whatever the outcome, this campaign has set the scene for a possible federal campaign this year. We have seen some of our national parliamentary representatives (and even the aspiring ALP MP Cheryl Kernot meeting the people in our shopping malls) lending a hand to their ACT colleagues. But in general, the major parties locally and their federal equivalents have kept their distance. Having axed 10 000 public sector jobs in Canberra in recent times, the Coalition Government is not necessarily an asset for Ms Carnell. Interestingly, it has been suggested that local Labor leader, Wayne Berry, may not enhance Kim Beasley's image.

Labor supports public libraries

Australia's 'new Labor' commenced the task of re-inventing itself late last year with the redrafting of its party platform. Delegates to the Hobart conference in January this year put the finishing touches to what is to be the expression of the ALP's broad policy position on the necessarily diverse range of issues. Mark Latham, who is enthusiastically consolidating his position of Labor's current champion of libraries, successfully moved a motion at the conference to propose for the Party in Government a national responsibility for public libraries. We welcome this initiative and look forward to the nature of this support being detailed (together with a financial commitment) in the Party's election platform. The text of Mr Latham's resolution is incorporated within *Chapter 3, Developing Australia's human resources: education, training and population policy*, and reads:

'Labor will develop Australia's 1500 public libraries as a national network providing public access to new information technology. Acceptance of this national responsibility for libraries is the most cost-effective means by which the federal government can ensure fair and affordable access by all citizens to new types of information delivery and learning opportunity.'

This expression of support for our public libraries represents a departure from many previous political statements in that it is contained in that part of the policy which deals with the development of human resources and emphasises the learning opportunity presented through broad based access to information through new technologies. Previous statements have been most commonly found in the arts and culture sections of policy statements, which — while relevant — do not give recognition to the diversity of services provided by our libraries. We look forward to the prospect that the ALP will extend its vision to incorporate libraries in other sectors, especially the education sector. Our advocacy efforts will be directed to achieving this goal.

Coalition moves on tax and waterfront reform

While the Federal Opposition is busy rebuilding its image and direction without the distraction of governing the country (and without the resources), the Coalition parties are setting the stage for the radical restructuring of our tax system and implementing the workplace reforms embodied in their new industrial relations legislation.

Treasurer Peter Costello has announced that a broad-based consumption tax is firmly on the government's agenda. While the ghost of *Fightback!* importunes caution, Mr Costello clearly believes that reform of the current wholesale sales-tax system together with the capacity to deliver income tax cuts to a large swag of voters will ultimately be attractive to the Australian community.

In theory this is true but a number of powerful lobby groups will be seeking exemptions from this consumption tax regime, whatever its character, and therein lies the difficulty of selling it to the electorate in an election year. Compensation for the retired, unemployed and low-income earners who will not benefit from income tax relief, is also a key element of the success of this tax reform agenda. Other parties, including libraries, may require special treatment to compensate for their reduced purchasing power. As the detail emerges we will be analysing the impact on libraries and our personal members and providing feedback though *inCite*.

Industrial relations minister Peter Reith's reform of the waterfront has a certain appeal to the electorate especially given the stories of extraordinary wage deals and other terms and conditions enjoyed by the 'wharfies'. However there is great

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▶ risk in the current action by the National Farmers Federation, supported by Mr Reith, in setting up a training facility for waterfront workers at Webb Dock in Melbourne. If Mr Reith can achieve industrial reform, which essentially involves breaking the monopoly of the Maritime Union of Australia, on the waterfront without costly disruptions to the movement of goods through our docks he will emerge triumphant (and a possible contender for the leadership of his party?). If he is unsuccessful, this could be a major liability for his government.

The federal political scene has also been shaped in recent weeks by the conduct and outcomes of the Constitutional Convention. The prime minister's announcement of a referendum before the end of 1999, with bipartisan support, may have diffused this as a potentially divisive election issue. It remains to be seen what impact Wik and the economic crises in neighbouring Asia-Pacific countries might have.

NOIE chief executive appointed

Of interest to our members is the announcement of the CEO of the government's National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE). Dr Paul Twomey will soon leave his Frankfurt-based job as executive general manager of Austrade's Europe Region Office to take up the appointment. Under the chairmanship of the former chief of the ANZ Bank, Mr Don Mercer, NOIE should soon start to tackle the challenges of establishing a policy environment which will encourage Australian businesses to become leaders in the online

domestic and global financial market. These developments may well provide opportunities for libraries to support public access to the online financial market and reinforce the role that libraries play in developing the standards of information literacy that will be required if our community is to utilise these new services.

ALIA electoral strategy

These are just some of the political activities which are shaping the scene for this election year. The ALIA electoral strategy is under development and will be discussed at a special session of the March meeting of General Council. During the election campaign we hope to impress as many candidates as possible with the diversity and relevance of the services provided by all libraries — especially in this era of the knowledge economy. We hope to correct the misunderstanding that online information means that the intermediation of the information professional and the library is no longer required. Phil Gude, the Victorian minister for education, was recently quoted as saying 'there will be no need for a library in the future because each classroom will have computers to do the job'. Mr Gude was quick to declare that he was misquoted after some representations from local ALIA members including Victorian general councillor Trevor Wakely.

But this does serve as a reminder that we must be enthusiastic and well-informed advocates for the future role of libraries — especially in this election year with increased opportunities to attract the attention of the major parties. ■

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