



## The Political Perception Of The Public Library: the Australian view

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### Abstract

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Section of Library Theory and Research conducted an international project on The Political Perceptions of the Public Library during 2002–4 under the leadership of Professor Bob Usherwood of Sheffield University, UK. The project title is: *Public library politics – a transnational evaluative survey of national policy maker's attitudes to, and perceptions, of the role, value and impact of public library services*. The project aims to provide information on national and, where appropriate because of local circumstances, local or regional government's attitudes to public libraries. The results of the Australian component of the project are now being collated for the final IFLA report (Smith, 2004). This paper reports on the Australian project by describing the methodology and presenting a summary of the results. Descriptions of the theoretical framework for the study and a detailed literature review will appear in other publications once the international project is concluded. The paper concludes that there is a fear for the future of the public library in Australia and that this fear is primarily tied to funding issues. It is curious that this fear is despite there being political support at the local and state government levels for the public library.

### Introduction

This paper describes the Australian component of a much larger international collection of studies on the *Political perception of the public library*. The Australian section of the project commenced in August 2002 when the author introduced the context for Australian public librarianship in a report: *Australian politicians and the public library: background report* (Smith 2002a). Another paper, *Politicians on the other side of the world* (Smith, 2002b), was delivered at the project workshop at the IFLA Glasgow conference and summarised the history of public libraries in Australia from colonial times. The rationale and approach for the Australian study, including the template used for the interviews, is described in papers delivered at the Western Australian Local Government Librarians Conference in Perth Western Australia, February 2003 and later published in those conference proceedings and in the journal APLIS (Smith & Usherwood, 2003). The same interview structure, with small local variance to assist with interpretation of the questions, was applied world-wide. Even so, the results of the Australian project can only be regarded as a snapshot of the political issues confronting Australian public libraries.

### Background to the study

Australian data collection commenced in August 2002 with the appointment of the first author as the project officer. Of the three levels of government in Australia, two are principally involved in the provision of public library services: state and local government (Smith, 2002a). It was deemed necessary to capture the outlooks from these spheres of government and it was also considered

useful that data be gathered from the national (or federal) level of government. Emails were sent to each of the Australian State and Territory librarians to ascertain their willingness to assist. The project also required that the opinions of senior members of the library professional association (the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)) be sought.

The ways in which sample interviews were undertaken were left to the project assistants in each state/territory although each needed to adhere to the *Guide for local project officers* document which was emailed with the survey instrument. The interviews were in the form of personal interview, telephone interview and posting or emailing the survey instrument to potential respondents. The assistance of colleagues throughout the country is gratefully acknowledged for this component of the project data collection. The project officer collected data from Western Australia, from local government elected members in that state and elsewhere, and from senior members of the Australian library profession. Two State Librarians mentioned that it was "politically difficult at the moment" though they would get what information they could. Two other states, Tasmania and South Australia did not participate in the study. Tasmania emailed back very quickly stating that they would not participate, because of their "direct relationship to the state government and to the bureaucracy" making direct participation complicated, but that they "would be interested in the results". The situation for South Australia (SA) was complicated by the State Library building refurbishment program that was underway at the time. The approach to the 2 Territorian librarians (the Northern Territory (NT) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)) was more problematic.

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Changes were underway at the Northern Territory Library Service at the time. Consequently the project officer enlisted the co-operation of a library colleague in the NT to gather what data she could. An email was sent to the ACT library service to which there was no response. By the time it was remembered to follow this up, the other projects were well underway. As there had been many reminders and follow ups sent to these participating states and because of the many time lags, it was deemed too late to start again for the ACT.

As it transpired, and not for the want of trying, no data was collected from elected members of government at the national level. All project assistants were emailed the same interview template and project instructions so that a standard set of responses could be received. Seventy interviews took place with a summary of the data collected appearing in Table 1.

ENTITY	Unassigned	ACT	NSW*	NT*	QLD*	Vic*	WA*	SA*	Tas*	TOTAL
<b>Local government</b>										
Mayor	–	–	–	–	12	–	2	–	–	14
Councillor	–	–	3	3	3	3	7	–	–	19
Administrator	–	–	–	–	7	–	3	–	–	10
Library administrator	–	–	–	–	7	–	–	–	–	7
<b>State government</b>										
Minister	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	1
Member of Parliament	–	–	1	1	–	3	4	–	–	9
Administrator	–	–	–	–	–	3	1	–	–	4
Library Administrator	–	–	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	2
<b>ALIA</b>										
Senior elected member	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	3
Administrator	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>70</b>

\* – abbreviations for the states and territories of Australia are: NSW – New South Wales; NT – Northern Territory; QLD – Queensland; SA – South Australia; Tas – Tasmania; Vic – Victoria; WA – Western Australia.

**Table 1: Summary of data collection**

The data in Table 1 show that the interviews from Queensland (41% or 29 of the total of 70) outnumbered those from all other states. The next highest number of interviews occurred in Western Australia (WA), with 26% (18 of 70) of the total. The responses from the two most populous states in Australia, NSW and Victoria, are disappointingly small: with totals of 5 (7%) and 9 (13%) respectively.

When we consider the categories of politicians interviewed, the data reveal the difficulties in engaging politicians at the state level for interviews. The sample size from NSW comprised one interview with a politician at the state level and 4 local government councillors. The sample from Queensland is skewed towards local government mayors, with a small representation of councillors. There are no interviews with state politicians from Queensland. The interviews from WA are a little more balanced, with representation from state and local levels of government. The interviews from the NT include two Territory politicians of which one was a Minister. In fact the NT Minister was the only Minister interviewed. The absence of data from South Australia and Tasmania is disappointing.

Senior administrators and library administrators at the local and state levels were also interviewed. At the state level, 3 administrators from Victoria and 1 from WA were interviewed. A senior library administrator each from NSW and WA was

interviewed. At the local government level, 7 administrators from Queensland and 3 from WA were interviewed. As well, 7 local government library administrators from Queensland were interviewed. All 4 senior library association professionals who were approached were interviewed.

Since it was left to the project officer and assistants to gather what interviews were possible, the data collected present an imbalance from state to local government and from levels of political influence<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless the data are a start and the 70 sets of opinions in answer to the survey questions should reveal some general trends. Thirteen (or 19%) of the total number of respondents were members of the library profession, i.e. they were either local or state government library administrators or members of the professional association, ALIA. These views were required as a component of the overall project. Although their perceptions might be considered as turf protection there were very few instances where their responses indicated this.

An analysis of the views expressed by the interviewees follows. The separation of Mayors and Councillors as shown in Table 1 is not continued in the analysis since all of these local government politicians are considered “elected members” by their constituencies and each generally casts one vote<sup>2</sup> on council matters.

## The issues

The key issues which came from the responses are now considered. These issues transpired as the most significant amongst all those recorded and are thus perceived as having political impact on the provision of public library services in Australia:

- the function of the public library service;
- charging for public library services;
- the impact of information and computer technologies (ICTs).
- the political influence of the public library; and
- the future of the public library.

Each of the view expressed by the interviewees was tabulated in a series of tables which will appear in the full report (Smith, 2004). The summary which follows presents the key views. Since it was possible

for there to be more than one response to some of the questions, some of the totals might not match the total number of interviews.

## The function of the public library service

The main question which addressed the function of the public library service was:  
*what in your opinion is the most important function of the public library service today?* Fourteen key concepts were captured in the responses and there was some potential overlap in them. They were: access to books, access to IT, central to democracy, current & timely access to information, educational, equity of access, free services, inform & entertain, library programs & services, literacy, maintain high standards, recreational reading, research, safe community centre, community hub. The four most important responses are ranked in order of significance and shown in Table 2.

POLITICAL LEVEL/ FUNCTION	Local government			State government		Library Association		Total	
	<i>Order of significance</i>	<i>Elected member</i>	<i>Administrator</i>	<i>Library administrator</i>	<i>Elected member</i>	<i>Administrator/Library administrator</i>	<i>Elected member</i>		<i>Administrator</i>
1. Inform & entertain		15	3	2	2	1	–	–	23
2. Equity of access		7	3	5	2	–	–	1	18
3. Safe community centre, community hub		9	1		2	1	1		14
4. Current & timely access to information		4	2	1	3	1	1		12

**Table 2: The most important function of the public library**

The data in Table 2 reflect that some of the interviewees identified more than one function as being *most important*. The range of responses indicates that the functions of public libraries are not clearly understood and might not be considered “functions” by library professionals. Nevertheless in remaining true to the responses, these “functions” are thus reported. No one believed that the public library had no important function(s). The “function” which received the highest response was to *inform and entertain*. The terms used by the local government elected members to describe the *safe community centre/hub* were remarkably similar and there were three comments which stood out:

- social sanctuary;
- meeting of cultures; and
- libraries have a capacity to make a difference in their communities: HUGE! As well, one local government councillor remarked on the motto of her local public library: “Where cultures meet and Beethoven rocks”.

The significant preferences of the local government administrators were evenly spread with the most important function for the local government library administrators being the provision of *equity of access*.

The important functions of the public library for state government politicians were also evenly spread amongst the four significant

categories. However, further analysis of all of the data reveals that this level of politician sees the *educational* function as being even more significant, with 4 opinions recorded by them, and 3 opinions recorded for *research*.

There were five additional sub-questions or statements which were related to the issue of the function of the public library. The interviewees were given the following choices of response: strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. The questions and the responses to them were:

- *the public library is an essential public good* – strong support: strongly agree;
- *libraries underpin education* – strong support: strongly agree with others agreeing;
- *libraries promote social inclusion* – strong support with a more even spread between strongly agree and agree;
- *public libraries are an essential part of a democratic society* – no respondent disagreed with this statement;
- *libraries should promote freedom of information* – strong support for this statement in the strongly agree and agree categories. However there were 10 respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed with it.

Overall the respondents, in identifying a “function” for the public library recorded a number of positive categories.

### Charging for library services

The data in Table 3 reveal how the attitude to charging for library services was reflected in the responses received on the matter of charging for the loan of books.

POLITICAL LEVEL/ FUNCTION	Local government			State government		Library Association		Total
	Elected member	Administrator	Library administrator	Elected member	Administrator /library administrator	Elected member	Administrator	
strongly agree	2	1	–	–	–	–	–	3
agree	3	2	–	–	–	–	–	5
neither agree or disagree	1		1	2	1	–	–	5
disagree	11	4	–	3	1	2	–	21
strongly disagree	16	3	6	5	4	1	1	36

**Table 3: Charges should be introduced for the loan of books from public libraries**

Of the 70 respondents, 21 (or 30%) disagreed with charging for the loan of books from public libraries and 36 (or 51%) strongly disagreed with this notion. The remaining 13 respondents (or 19%) either supported it or were ambivalent. Of the latter respondents, it was local government elected members and administrators who strongly agreed/agreed that charges for the loan of books should be introduced. Those who were ambivalent came mainly from the state government categories: elected member and administrator. The support for free lending of library books, while strong, is not overwhelming and the responses from local and state government elected members and administrators must be noted.

The matter of financial support for libraries loomed large in the eyes of many of those interviewed. Some of their more specific observations are described below. Some closed their interview emphasizing the difficulties in obtaining funding for their public library service.

Comments were made regarding charging for public library services when the interviewees were asked what they found *most* and *least satisfying* regarding public libraries and what their *hopes* and *fears* for the public library service might be. The similar responses to these open-ended questions were grouped together. In the *Least Satisfying* section the highest ranking response was:

- “Can’t afford to do what we’d like”. When combined with another response: “lack of/ losing funding”, the replies totalled 16 made up of 10 elected members, 3 administrators, 2 library administrators from local government, plus 1 state government administrator.

This response needs to be seen in the light of others in this category. The next *least satisfying* characteristic of the public library was “can’t get what you want/ irrelevant holdings”, 9 responses. This was followed by “conservatism of library staff “ and “lack of appreciation for services and abilities”, each scoring 8 responses.

When we next consider the responses for *fears* for the public library service, 50% or 12 of the 24 responses recorded, acknowledged funding concerns:

- the shortage of funding will lead to user pays;
- shrinkage of funding could lead to decrease or closure of library services: once they close it is very hard to bring them back again;
- shrinking funding will make them moribund;
- the current belief that the market will deliver everything and we are pushing too much of the social dividend towards philanthropy or a user pays system;
- cost of the provision of services will exceed our capacity to fund;
- cost of service delivery will lead to short term decisions;
- small libraries will be priced out of existence;
- it is very easy to cut budgets in culture and the arts, which is where public libraries sit in my state;
- asset management is not sufficiently supported and will run down;
- younger professionals will not be attracted to working in them;
- government policy on censorship, especially with regard to the Internet;
- adequate funding for digitization of our cultural heritage.

In essence respondents perceived that issues including the cost of the provision of public library services today, an apparent lack of performance in the delivery of needed items and a fear of lack of funding could lead to the consequent slow redevelopment of the modern public library or worse, that it might be priced out of existence. When this is considered with the impact of information and computer technologies (ICTs) on the delivery of information to users, the future of the public library services in Australia begins to look quite bleak.

### Impact of ICTs

The second most “fear” was the impact if ICTs. The impact of ICTs was noted in three parts of the survey. The first was a general question: *how do you think advances in information and computer technology will affect the public library service in*

*Australia?* The following responses indicate the positive themes of the responses to this question:

- the library is very important and we are currently spending \$20M to build a fully electronic library service for students and young people;
- advances in IT won't affect us as we will keep up with it;
- IT will improve library services and people's use of them, especially the free availability of the Internet;
- adds a new dimension for people in their 50s, 60s and 70s, the traditional borrowers of books;
- e-libraries alongside traditional ones;
- the internet gives entry level understanding and superficial understanding. I have a higher level of trust in libraries;
- public libraries must supply free internet services;
- IT will offer more avenues of assistance, particularly to remote communities;
- very useful for travellers;
- libraries will take care of socio-economic disparity and provide ICTs.

Some challenging and some negative themes in response to this question were also detected:

- the cost of IT will slow down its provision;
- public libraries will have difficulty in keeping up with technological change;
- face to face communication will be reduced as users access via the Internet;
- ICTs will kill or renew the public library. The jury is out at the moment;
- ICTs might help change people's way of thinking about librarians: moving from checkout chick mentality of library workers to knowledge workers;
- Must be collaboration among stakeholders in community. ICT is a means to an end and needs negotiation;
- IT is changing usage, design and service delivery

ICT provision did not feature strongly in the question regarding the function of the public library. Only three local government elected members considered it the most important function.

ICTs received attention in the *most/least satisfying* questions of the survey. This section could elicit more than one response from those surveyed. Four elected members and 3 administrators from local government found ICT provision a *satisfying* aspect of public library provision as did one state government elected member. Of the *least satisfying* comments, ICT provision and service did not rate highly. One local government elected member commented on the downgrading of the importance of the book as an issue and one state government administrator found that IT was not always available.

Comments on IT arose in the last question of the survey: *is there anything of importance about the public library service in Australia which I have not asked or to which I have not given enough attention?* The responses included:

- new technologies are very expensive (local government elected member);
- information technology and its burgeoning and wide influence (local government elected member);
- more attention needs to be paid to computer compatibility and networking to enable greater sharing amongst libraries, and not only those in the one state (state administrator); and
- the people who most need ICT are those most excluded

because of (a) poor telephone facilities, and (b) the ability to get technical assistance without great expense and slowness of response (local government elected member).

There was thus strong recognition of the influence of ICTs in regard to the challenges they present as well as their usefulness in the provision of Australian public library services.

### ***The political influence of the public library***

The project results offered a number of ways to interpret the political influence of the public library. These can be divided into three sections:

- subtle political influence of the public library;
- the use of the public library for political decision making; and
- the ways in which the respondents' impressions of the public library are influenced.

The matter of **subtle political influence** of the public library service has already been touched on earlier in this paper. In addressing the functions of the public library, the relevant sub-questions earlier analysed are:

- the public library is an essential public good, where there was strong support;
- libraries underpin education also gained strong support. The subtlety of this political influence can be seen in the importance that the state elected members placed on the role of education in the provision of public library services.
- Libraries promote social inclusion which gained strong support; and
- public libraries are an essential part of a democratic society where no respondent disagreed with this statement.

Subtle political influence was considered in the responses to the statement: *libraries have a capacity to make a difference in their communities*. The degree of ambivalence found in the international analysis of surveys undertaken with regard to this comment was not as noticeable in the Australian context. Table 4 reports the responses received.

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POLITICAL LEVEL FUNCTION	Local government			State government		Library association		Total
	Elected member	Administrator	Library administrator	Elected member	Administrator /library administrator	Elected member	Administrator	
strongly agree	20	3	4	9	3	2	1	42
agree	11	8	3	1	2	1	–	26
neither agree or disagree	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	2
disagree	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
strongly disagree	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
TOTALS	32	11	7	10	6	3	1	70

**Table 4: Libraries have a capacity to make a difference in their communities**

No respondent disagreed with this statement. In fact, as earlier remarked, one local government elected member said that this capacity was: HUGE! The significant indication of this capacity is the 90% support of the state elected members in this belief, together with the 96% of local government elected members showing support (62% strongly agreeing and 34% agreeing). In another part of the survey, two local government councillors from the Northern Territory, from different electorates, noted how much the library, and the librarians, HAD made a difference to their local communities, particularly in regard to social inclusivity.

The subtle political influence of the public library was also evident in the responses to the question: *what evidence do you use to assess the value and impact of the public library service?* The views on the measure of the value and impact of the public library were quite polarised. User feedback in the guise of usage figures, user satisfaction, and general community feedback formed the majority of the responses from all of the respondents. However there were two particular comments made in the replies to this question which indicate that all is not as rosy as it seems:

- the data is based on the vocal minority supporters and a fanatical profession (a state government administrator);
- do public libraries provide knowledge that turns out to be relevant to implementation of policy? (state government administrator)

How **useful did the respondents find the public library for political decision making?** There were three statements which could be seen to address this issue. The first was: *libraries contribute to the government's policy objectives*. This statement left room for interpretation regarding the type of library which might be meant. While it was noted that the survey was about public libraries, some state politicians still mentioned the worth of their parliamentary library in their comments, as they did in other parts of the survey.

The responses to this statement were more varied than those recorded so far. There is an appreciable ambivalence towards this notion with 23 of the 70 respondents, or 32%, in the “neither agree or disagree” (21%), “disagree” (10%), and “strongly disagree” (1%) sections of the survey. The remaining 68% supported the notion that libraries, and in most instances this was clarified as public libraries, do contribute to the government's policy objectives. Some of the responses from local government in Queensland were notable, including:

- *Yes: Queensland – the SMART state*. This statement demonstrated the allegiance between the services that public libraries provide in Queensland and the state government's presentation of the state as the Smart State. The comment also demonstrates a close relationship between the state and local governments for the provision of public library services.

The second and third statements were regarding the usefulness of:

- *the extent to which advice from professional associations influences your decisions about the operation of library services, and*
- *the extent to which the advice from individual professionals influences your decisions about the operation of library services.*

The responses to these two questions were quite mixed and are shown in Table 5, Policy influences. By way of comparison, another response seeking the extent to which advice from government officers (or bureaucrats) was also influential, was sought.

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POLITICAL LEVEL/ FUNCTION	Local government	Administrator	Library administrator	State government	Administrator/ Library administrator	Library Association	Administrator	Totals
(a) government officers; (b) professional associations; (c) individual professionals	Elected member	Administrator	Library administrator	Elected member	Administrator/ Library administrator	Elected member	Administrator	
large extent (a)	4	2	1	3	3	–	–	13
(b)	7	1	2	4	1	2	1	18
(c)	8	2	2	2	–	1	–	15
some extent (a)	17	6	5	2	–	1	1	32
(b)	13	6	3	2	3	1	–	28
(c)	17	6	6	6	4	1	1	41
small extent (a)	8	1	1	2	2	1	–	15
(b)	9	1	2	2	2	–	–	16
(c)	3	2	–	2	2	–	–	9
no extent at all (a)	4	1	1	3	–	1	–	10
(b)	3	1	–	2	–	–	–	6
(c)	4	–	1	–	–	–	–	5

**Table 5: Policy influences**

The responses for this section of the survey do not always add up because one of the local project assistants reworded the intent of the questions and sought an overarching response to: what influences your decisions about public library networks? In these cases the response did sometimes capture the essence of the template sub-questions and was thus recorded.

Professional associations and individual professionals do carry some influence over the decision making regarding the operation of the library service with 68% of respondents relying on professional associations to *some* or a *large extent*, and 80% relying on individual professionals. However there were also responses which indicated that neither had much influence with 32% of respondents admitting to *small* or *no* influence from the professional associations and 20% from individual professionals.

There was a related professional question which took into account the use of public library standards and their influence on decision making regarding library operations. The respondents demonstrated a general knowledge that standards in library practice existed, but did not indicate how frequently they were referred to. The survey specifically mentioned the IFLA standards, but for the purposes of the Australian context, any library standard was accepted as a useful reference for this question. There is a heavy reliance on standards amongst the Australian respondents.

The final indication of the political influence of the public library was expressed in the ways in which the **respondents' impressions of the public library are influenced**. The importance of public opinion in assessing the worth and value of the public library service was reported. User satisfaction ranked the highest of characteristics when assessing whether *libraries were a satisfying brief*.

Two further questions assessed the importance of public and media opinion and how these might influence decisions regarding the operation of library services. Again, the responses regarding the influence of public opinion ranked highest amongst the elected members of local and state governments. All but one state government elected member ranked public opinion *to a large*

*extent* and the majority of local government elected members thought public opinion ranked either to a *large* or *some extent*.

Respondents were more diffident regarding the influence of the media. Eighty five percent of the local government elected members regarded media influence of *some*, *small* or *no* influence, with 30% of the state elected members acknowledging influence *to some extent* and the remaining 70% considered the influence to be of a *small* or *no* extent.

When asked *what are the main ways you keep yourself informed about the needs and attitudes of the public regarding library services in Australia*, the significant responses were for community feedback, which was of most importance for elected members of both political levels and for local government administrators. Elected members also relied on librarians and staff and to a lesser extent on consultancy reports and policy makers.

In reply to the question: *What is the single most important thing of influence when taking decisions about the public library service*, the significant responses were inclusion and community need.

The influence of the public is overwhelming. The political influence of public libraries and professionals is less obvious and the influence of media reports even less important. If this is the case, then what did our respondents think that the future of the public library service in Australia would be?

### **The future of the public library**

Respondents were asked to express their thoughts on the future of the public library in line with their *hopes* and *fears* for the service. Some of the responses to this section of the survey have been reported earlier. Nevertheless, the main theme which emerged was one of fear: that funding would not be sustained and maintained. In general, the themes which emerged were:

- the difficulty in sustaining funding requirements due to the vagaries of the political process and the general demand for funding from so many other sectors of the community;
- in the case of Queensland and the Northern Territory, the difficulty in gaining enough funding from the state to deliver

- modern and appropriate library services;
- that other areas will take the lead in the electronic area and public libraries will lose the tremendous advantage they have been given;
- non-library users are unable to see the tremendous impact that libraries have on the community; and
- that services would not remain free to the public.

Even some of the *hopes* contained a tinge of fear. There are some subtle calls for action on the part of the library community.

The *hopes* included:

- public libraries improve drastically, will continue to reform;
- we can extend our hours of operation;
- government of some flavour will pick up libraries as a real political issue and recognise them as real contributors to the community well being of the nation and fund them accordingly;
- they don't reduce their services;
- they keep abreast of information technology;
- outback digital networks are needed if communities are to keep up;
- we develop a more computer literate society;
- we ensure small rural communities are able to maintain pace with better resources centres;
- they will be revitalised as a source of knowledge to generate debate in a liberal democracy;
- there is recognition of value of public libraries in the form of increased funding and increased salaries;
- they lose their monocultural image and become truly multicultural;
- there is active collaboration between libraries of all kinds, and between galleries and museums to enrich cultural life.

A final way of assessing the future of the public library service was covered in the last question of the survey: *do you think that there is anything of importance about the public library service in Australia which I have not asked or to which I have not given enough attention?* Most of the respondents said: No. However there were some who made extra comments and those comments not covered elsewhere in this paper were:

- the libraries in remote communities have added dimensions and roles (local government councillor);
- professional development for librarians in remote areas (local government councillor);
- the networks of libraries and how they support each other (state/territory politician); although what is missing at the national level is the co-ordination of this resource (another);
- the importance of the social hub for smaller communities (local government mayor; state/territory politician; association elected member);
- as a point of social interaction for persons largely housebound (local government mayor);
- librarians are the salt of the earth (state/territory politician);
- role of the public library in the promotion of reading;
- promoting the positive image of the librarian through publication of things like the results of this survey to local government councillors (library administrator);
- libraries are not just sombre places. The joy of reading and research can be both a solitary and communal pleasure (state/territory politician);
- what about the non-readers? (state/territory politician);
- the federated system of public library provision in Australia and local government imperatives mean that there are

different agendas and this makes national initiatives messy and difficult to achieve (library association professional; state government politician);

- the service often runs on passionate, though invisible, people (state government administrator, association elected member);
- librarians are not good at marketing themselves. The service would be one of the largest, most inclusive and accessible community operations in the nation but this is not understood or recognized (many).

## Conclusions and recommendations

Who make the important decisions regarding Australia's public libraries and what are the indicators of influence on these people? At the moment these people are the state and local government elected members. Local government elected members generally support their public library services. Even though there was enormous and surprisingly strong support from the state government elected members, many of these were removed from the decision making process for public libraries in their state in that only 2 were closely associated with the provision of public library services. Yet it was surprising how a survey like this made them all think about the value of their library service. Nevertheless state/local government partnership arrangements exist for the provision of the country's public library services, so the opinions of state politicians (elected members), who all vote at budget time, is very important. Unfortunately there were no interviews with national politicians. It might be argued that as the national (or federal) government plays little role in the provision of Australia's public library services, we need not bother. However, the interviews might also make them take notice, particularly if the questions are re-cast to deal with the more political aspects of the provision of this service.

No respondent disagreed with the statement: *libraries have a capacity to make a difference in their communities*. When this is coupled with the significant reliance all elected members placed on community support and use of their public library facility, the importance of the close ties between the public library, its staff, its local government administration and its whole community must be recognized. Do national politicians realize this? The state elected members who were interviewed, do. Yet elected members also raised other issues including the non-user, the remote communities, the conservatism of library staff and the need for better co ordination between all three levels of government in provision of infrastructure and support for community library services.

The most crucial issue was funding, or lack of it, or the difficulties in obtaining it. When we consider the responses for *fears* for the public library service, 50% of the responses acknowledged funding concerns. Of the 70 respondents, 30% disagreed with charging for the loan of books from public libraries and 51% strongly disagreed with this notion. The remaining 19% of respondents either supported it or were ambivalent. The matter of charging for library services (and not just books) has created heated debate amongst the Australian library community over the years. In 2001 the Association's statement on *Free Library Services to All* and *Freedom to Read* were both amended and rolled into the one: *Statement on free access to information*. This statement relies on matters of principle<sup>3</sup>.

There also appears to have been a relaxation in emotion amongst public librarians in recent times. The self-belief and passion of

## The Political Perception Of The Public Library: the Australian view

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public librarians is recognized by elected members, however zealotry is rarely tolerated. Australia's public librarians have been through difficult times and have come to realize that their public library services are expensive to maintain. Nevertheless the general provision of public library services in Australia remains free to the public with nominal charges being made for items like room bookings, overdue loans, photocopying and in some libraries, internet use. The support for free lending of library books, while strong, was not overwhelming and the responses from local and state government elected members and administrators must be noted.

When we return to the "functions" of the public library which the respondents deemed important, it is noted that to inform and entertain, equity of access, safe community centre/ community hub, and current and timely access to information were the first four ranked categories of importance. However it is also noted that state government politicians saw the educational function as being significant, with 4 opinions recorded as well as the 3 opinions recorded for research.

The political influence of the public library's communities is also evident in the responses to the question: *what evidence do you use to assess the value and impact of the public library service?* The significant responses were: feedback from the public, number of users, user satisfaction. The political influence of public libraries and professionals is less obvious than some of the other responses to the project questions. The influence of public opinion is overwhelming and the influence of media reports less important. It is therefore easy for a local government administrator to say that decision makers should recognize the power of the public library and fund it accordingly. The truth is that despite the many studies reporting the strength of the public library (e.g. Mercer 1995, Phibbs 1996, Briggs et al. 1996) there remain fears for the future of the public library in Australia. If the public library is such an institution in the country, why is funding it such a struggle?

Strong partnership models (between local and state governments) were reported as existing in NSW and in Queensland. It seemed evident from the responses received that while this might generally be the case in Queensland, it was not so evident from the responses from NSW. Otherwise more responses to the survey should have been forthcoming from this state? South Australia and Tasmania did not participate so we can only guess the situation in those states. The partnership situation in WA<sup>4</sup> is currently under negotiation between the two levels of government. In 2002, the National Library of Australia convened a Peak Bodies Forum to discuss issues of mutual interest to the library sector. The National, State and Territory libraries are also members of the Council of Australian State Libraries (CASL). Because of the involvement of each state library in the public library activities of their state, public libraries can benefit from CASL initiatives. There has also been the recent establishment of the Public Libraries Association (PLA), "a body for national representation for public libraries in Australia and advocating on their behalf" (Public Libraries Australia, 2002). Yet as one respondent remarked: the infrastructure of linked communication and common philosophies should be better used by state and federal governments. Another respondent called on better co-operation and collaboration between the different levels of government. If these bodies are in place, how might they address such issues?

Public libraries are political entities because it is politicians who make the funding decisions for them and their future. Those who wish them to continue need to impress not only their user community upon whom the mercurial political favour of the relevant elected representatives relies. They also need to be sincere, mature and strategic in their political planning such that they can secure long term funding for the continuation of this valuable community service. Two of the states mentioned that they were experiencing "politically difficult" times. This tends to be a fact of life for many publicly funded entities with each taking its turn to be in and out of favour. Examples of being in favour can be found in the recent refurbishments of the State Library of Victoria, of South Australia which did not, however, respond, and now Queensland. The challenge is to sustain it.

The competition for political favour and for government funds is fierce and unending. There is always some issue at the top of the government's list which requires urgent attention and it appears that the public library continues to struggle for attention and funds. Yet it was interesting to note the strong support for public libraries, particularly from the state government elected members. It is also interesting to note that some public libraries are undergoing a resurgence in building programs and the provision of ICTs.

It is therefore recommended that:

- as part of the advocacy recommended by some of the respondents and to significantly enlarge the response rate and cover a range of politicians to give more meaningful results, further interviews be undertaken in all states and territories.
- A considerable number of state and possibly national politicians be interviewed. There were no interviews with national politicians in this study. Future interviews might make national politicians take notice since there is considerable interest amongst the Australian library community that this should happen.
- In order to address potential criticisms of a study such as this, there be some consideration regarding who should undertake the interviews and efforts be made to seek non-aligned interviewers.
- Re-drafting of some of the questions be undertaken to better explain their intent

**Keywords:** public libraries – Australia; political perception – libraries; public library funding

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> My own experience was that it was extremely difficult to tie down politicians for interviews. As a working professional, I could not be at their beck and call to telephone/visit at some of the times it suited them. Consequently not all politicians approached by me were, in the end, interviewed. The same can be said for posting/emailing the interview schedules to willing candidates – not all were returned.

<sup>2</sup> This depends on the standing orders of the local government authority and whether the Mayor, who normally presides over full Council meetings, has a deliberative vote plus a casting vote in the case of a tied vote.

### <sup>3</sup> **Statement on free access to information**

#### **ALIA objects addressed**

To promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interests of all Australians and a thriving culture and democracy.

#### **Principle**

Freedom can be protected in a democratic society only if its citizens have unrestricted access to information and ideas (from ALIA 2001).

<sup>4</sup> WA Local Government Assn, personal communication, 2003–2004.