

Public Libraries 2020 Summit – 6 March 2006

Meeting the challenges of the future: State Library of Victoria and the Council of Australian State Libraries – Anne-Marie Schwirtlich

Last week, following a decade in government, the Prime Minister outlined his blueprint or five goals for the Australian Government.¹ To a greater or lesser extent, libraries can articulate a role for themselves in all five goals, however, it is around the fifth challenge he identified and labeled as 'in some ways our greatest' that libraries might play some part.

The Prime Minister labeled this fifth challenge as maintaining 'our great national unity, our social cohesion and above all our egalitarian spirit. ... We need to find innovative ways to break the vicious cycles of poor parenting, low levels of education, unemployment and health problems that can afflict some individuals and communities. And we need to reinforce the virtuous cycles of caring families, strong learning environments, good jobs and healthy lifestyles that allow others to succeed in a competitive world. We need to find ways of restoring order to zones of chaos in some homes and communities, zones of chaos that can wreck young Australian lives.'²

The Working Group that Margaret Smith is leading on our collective behalf has set us the task of contributing to the blueprint for collections and access in Victoria – a blueprint with the horizon of 2020.

As individuals, as professionals and as public institutions we are striving to do two things:

- to make a valuable contribution; and
- to be valued.

To do that we must understand and position ourselves to serve the community and the local, state and national public policy agenda.

Communities and governments are anxious to achieve wellbeing, good health, good family relationships and engagements with wider social networks, good educational opportunities and outcomes, suitable employment, a decent income and freedom from financial stress, a decent and affordable place to live, feeling safe and secure, and access to suitable transport.

Over the next 15 years how can our work, our collections, access to our resources and services play a role in achieving this? How can we nurture and satisfy curiosity in times of personal and community need?

Charles Leadbeater has talked about how technology and the internet can spur self-help in ways that might revolutionise health care:

'By 2010 it should be routine for a patient leaving hospital after an operation to be given: an NHS Direct telephone number to seek advice on recovery; a website address from which they could download relevant information through either the internet or digital television; a list of digital television programmes relevant to their recovery; an interactive television service to

allow them to see a nurse to advise them while they talk over the telephone; a list of email addresses for patients in their locality who have recently been through the same operation and who are ready to exchange experiences; and the internet address of a national self-help group which will provide support and advice. Already about 80% of 'health incidents' are dealt with at home. Surveys show that patients want more home-based health care. The advent of digital technology should make it possible to take some large strides away from the hospital-based health care system of the twentieth century to a more home-based health care system in the twenty-first century.¹³

If that vision for healthcare in the 21st century in the United Kingdom is one that Australia will follow we should rejoice because it is about giving the individual information, networks and control – everything libraries are seeking to do and, I hope, things to which we might wish to contribute given the priority that all governments accord to our health system. That vision for healthcare also warrants reflection about whether aspects of it can be used to shape our library services over the next 15 years.

On Thursday, 23rd February we were delighted that many of you were able to join us at the Library of the 21st Century Symposium. It isn't my intention to give you a blow by blow description of the papers that provoked our thinking on that day but I will mention three points made by three of the speakers.

Linda O'Brien, Vice Principal (Information) at the University of Melbourne, spoke in the session devoted to *Libraries and Learning*.⁴ She talked about the revolution in scholarly research, the way that grid technology has enabled multi-disciplinary teams spread around the world to amass and generate vast amounts of data and she asked how we will preserve and maintain access to any such data considered worthy of long-term preservation. Are we confident that the life of Victoria, in all its facets, is sufficiently documented and is there a role we might play in this?

Vicki Williamson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Ballarat, spoke in the same session about collaboration, the demographic characteristics of librarianship in Australia and the need for change capturing our attention with a vivid Titanic metaphor. She quoted from Peter Smith's *Of Icebergs, Ships, and Arrogant Captains* as follows:

'Consider the Titanic as a metaphor. It's a dramatic image, maybe a little much, but I think it fits. What is the greatest single problem associated with the Titanic? An arrogant captain? The iceberg? A longer view suggests that even if the Titanic had survived its maiden voyage, the ship was doomed. The iceberg, the captain, and the disaster only confused the situation. The real problem facing the greatest cruise ship ever built was the airplane. The seeds of destruction for the ocean-travel industry had been sown nearly a decade earlier, in Kitty Hawk. Cruise ships could not compete, and attempts to make them competitive ultimately failed ... Economic and social icebergs challenge our course. We must anticipate them, and we must navigate dexterously to survive. But the icebergs we face aren't our long-term problem. The greater risk is that the potential of our ships, because of their basic design, is limited and therefore fundamentally outmoded.'⁵

Vicki asked 'what is the library's or the librarian's iceberg?' She argued that 'the lethal iceberg looming in front of the good ship library is our profession's response to change, our hesitant culture and cautious attitude.'⁶

Vicki's comments are timely and provoking. Her deployment of the Titanic metaphor should also give us pause to consider the healthy niche market that cruise ships have carved for themselves in the 21st century and to explore how Google and other airplanes, and libraries, can collaborate over the next 15 years.

Charles Leadbeater concluded the Symposium with a volley of observations and questions⁷ on which he expanded the following day. He talked about changes to creativity and the importance today of participation and co-production rather than the protection of special knowledge saying 'In profession after profession ... this is now true; that the spectators want to be players. They want to take to the pitch at least some of the time. That does not mean that the professional players need to exit the pitch ... but they will now exist ... in a much larger space with many, many more players.'⁸ In reflecting that 'the public sector works best not when it's just delivering a service but when it's giving people tools and platforms where they can solve problems themselves' he observed the dichotomy facing libraries ' librarians want to talk the language of participation and openness but actually you're torn back to [the] language of guardianship. And so words I've heard are: guardian, protectors, conservers, gate keepers. I think you've got to get rid of all that. ... People ... want advice, help, and actually you need to think of a whole set of other words about librarians and libraries which are relaxing, exciting, welcoming, friendly, conversational, social, flirtatious.'⁹ Challenging words as we think about collections and access between now and 2020.

Late last year the Library Board of Victoria articulated the strategic directions for the State Library of Victoria under the title, *slv21*. The Library's directions are designed to build a state at the forefront of the knowledge economy thereby assisting the government to achieve its vision for Victoria's future. There are ten strategic initiatives in *slv21* aimed to place the Library at the hub of an integrated public knowledge network, reaching all Victorians, connecting to the global world of information and building collaborations that will best serve Victorians. The ten strategies are:

1. *slv* online
2. Engaging our customers
3. The information gateway
4. Digital Victoria
5. Communities online
6. Created content
7. Finalizing the physical redevelopment
8. *slv@swanston*
9. organizational capability, and
10. partnerships for the future.¹⁰

The Council of Australian State Libraries (CASL), which includes both the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand, has four national priorities on its agenda:

- the scoping and development, in partnership with the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training, of a national web-based real time reference service for people of school age – this would complement the *AskNow!* reference service in which many of you are important partners;
- the development of a free national digital resource of Australian newspapers;

- the preparation of a national digital strategy for libraries to form the basis of the contribution from libraries to a digitization summit to be organized and hosted by the Collections Council of Australia later this year. The brief for this project is in embryonic form but CASL is committed to seeking the advice of the library sector as widely as possible to ensure the strategy is as cogent and compelling as possible; and
- advocating, through the Collections Council of Australia, for a national inquiry into collecting and collections in Australia.

Victoria invests something like \$135 million in public libraries each year – a figure that reaches \$165 million if you include the State Library of Victoria’s recurrent appropriation. Collectively it is our responsibility to invest that astutely.

There are, I think, four preconditions for investing wisely:

- Strengthening our awareness of the public policy agenda and insinuating ourselves in it;
- Seeking ways to collaborate locally, nationally and internationally no matter how unnatural or how hard it seems at any given moment;
- Maintaining our understanding of what is happening in our communities and in society; and
- Being prepared to take the blowtorch to our own thinking and practices.

The memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, cites a sobering example of rigid practice:

‘The chief film censor in Iran, up until 1994, was blind. Well, nearly blind. Before that, he was the censor for theater. One of my playwright friends once described how he would sit in the theater wearing thick glasses that seemed to hide more than they revealed. An assistant who sat by him would explain the action onstage, and he would dictate the parts that needed to be cut. After 1994, this censor became the head of the new television channel. There, he perfected his methods and demanded that the scriptwriters give him their scripts on audiotape; they were forbidden to make them attractive or dramatize them in any way. He then made his judgments about the scripts based on the tapes. More interesting, however, is the fact that his successor, who was not blind ... nonetheless followed the same system.’¹¹

To contribute value, and to be valued, now, in 2020 and beyond we must change with agility and develop or harness the capabilities we need particularly in developing collections and access.

¹ John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, Address to the 10th Anniversary Dinner Westin Hotel, Sydney on 2 March 2006 – <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech1799.html>

² Ibid

³ Charles Leadbeater, *Innovate from within*, DEMOS, p 42

⁴ Linda O’Brien, Vice Principal (Information) University of Melbourne, Library of the 21st Century Symposium, 23 February 2006 – <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/programs/events/index.html> and <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/site/feeds/index.html>

⁵ Vicki Williamson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor University of Ballarat, Library of the 21st Century Symposium, 23 February 2006 - ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Charles Leadbeater, Demos Foundation, Library of the 21st Century Symposium, 23 February 2006 - <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/programs/events/2006/symposium/economy/leadbeater.html>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Additional information about the State Library of Victoria's strategic directions is at <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/promotions/slv21.com/index.html>

¹¹ Azar Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (Hodder, New York, 2004), p29