

Commonwealth Grants Commission

THE STRUGGLE FOR FUNDS

OVER THE PAST 18 months all Australian state libraries have been involved, along with other government departments, in a massive review of the tax sharing arrangements between the Commonwealth and the states.

The review is being conducted by members of the Commonwealth Grants Commission, headed by its Chairman, Mr Justice Rae Else-Mitchell. He is no stranger to libraries: he was formerly President of the Library Council of New South Wales and is currently a member of the Council of the National Library of Australia.

The main object of the review, which must be completed by June 1981, is to recommend the shares of a set amount of personal income tax to be returned to the states by the Commonwealth.

One of the guiding principles is that 'Each state should be able to provide government services comparable with those of other states without imposing taxes and charges higher than those of other states'.¹

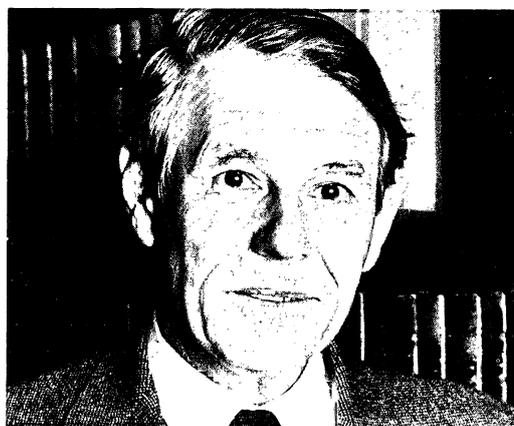
The amounts involved are enormous: 'As the total amount of state entitlements is between \$4000 and \$5000 million, it will be appreciated that even a small change may have a major effect on the finances of a state; a shift of one percent in the relativities will represent between \$40 and \$50 million'.²

Submissions from all states

All states have now made various submissions to the Commission, among them, submissions from state libraries and library boards.³ There has been intense and sometimes frantic intelligence-gathering on the part of some institutions as they struggled to compare their services, finances and statistics with those of other states.

As Borchardt and Thawley have recently pointed out,⁴ even the supposedly straightforward task of collating statistics would have caused them some anguish.

The Commission has also inspected some library services. One day in the itinerary of the



Mr Justice Else-Mitchell . . . Chairman of the Grants Commission. Photograph: News Ltd

Commission members in New South Wales included inspections of a school, a remand centre, a research laboratory, a psychiatric hospital and, after lunch, a sewerage works. That day, part of which was spent experiencing the urban sprawl and traffic conditions in Sydney at first hand in a battered bus, was rounded off by an inspection of the State Library.

Hearings in all states

At the hearings which were held in all states earlier this year, the Commission was able to question closely the originators of the submissions. The submissions from library agencies, often running to 60 or more pages in length, are intrinsically interesting. They throw light, not only on present perceptions of libraries of different states, but also on the hopes and expectations of their administrators. How realistic these expectations may prove when the final percentages are doled out by the Commonwealth Parliament, remains to be seen.

Some good news, some bad

Whatever the increases or decreases in the slices of the tax cake finally allotted to each state, one thing is clear. The overall cake will be the same size: a win for some states will mean corresponding losses in others.

The Commission is in the exquisite position of comparing the barely comparable (and where is that better shown than in the varied pattern of library services and resources in Australia?) and of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Libraries cannot expect to fare any better or any worse than other agencies in their state. Some which have performed particularly well may expect some reward from their masters, but it is obvious that the theory of ironing out disparities between services will go nowhere near achieving real progress in library services in Australia.

That is no fault of the Commission, nor of the state libraries and boards which have co-operated or competed, ratiocinated or

reasoned during the current exercise. It was just because, a few years ago, the right ideas came at the wrong time.

For the present, we can look forward with something less than enthusiasm to the Commission's findings in June 1981.

David J. Jones

Notes

- 1 Else-Mitchell, Rae. Fiscal equality between the States: the new role of the Commonwealth Grants Commission. *Australian journal of public administration* 38 (2) 163 June 1979.
- 2 Ibid, p165.
- 3 The submissions from state library authorities, which in some cases form part of general departmental or state submissions, are as follows:
(Submission) *State Library of New South Wales*. Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 1980.
Submission prepared by the Library Board of Queensland for presentation to the State Relativities Review Division of the Commonwealth Grants Commission for the 'Six State Relativities Review'. Brisbane: Library Board of Queensland, 1980.
(Submission) *Libraries, museums and other cultural activities*. Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1980.
(Submission) *State Library of Tasmania*. Hobart: State Library of Tasmania, 1980.
(Submission) *Commonwealth Grants Commission Review of Income Tax Relativities / Ministry for the Arts* (Victoria). Melbourne: Ministry for the Arts, 1980.
Review of State Relativities / Library Board of Western Australia submission to the Commonwealth Grants Commission. Perth: Library Board of Western Australia, 1980.
- 4 Borchardt, D.H. and Thawley J. The present state of Australian library statistics. *Australian Library Journal* 29 (3) 129-133, August 1980.

FOI and Copyright

THE DATE FOR the next federal election has now been announced by the Prime Minister. Australians will go to the polls on Saturday, 18 October 1980 to elect a new House of Representatives and half of the Senate.

In the usual flurry of legislation being rushed through before Parliament rises, two items are of particular concern to librarians. The Copyright Amendment Bill 1980, which substantially amends the Copyright Act, has now passed through the Senate and is expected to pass through the House of Representatives by the time you receive this issue. A detailed report on the way the amendments affect libraries and librarians will appear in the next issue of Incite.

The same success cannot be reported for the Freedom of Information Bill. The Government has now announced its response to the recommendations of the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, and the Bill and the proposed amendments will not be discussed in this Parliament, but will be re-introduced into the new Parliament. The Chairman of the Senate Committee, Senator Alan Missen, attacked the Government's response to the recommendations of the Report and reportedly walked out of the Senate during debate on the Bill. A full report on the Government's response will be featured in the next issue.

Tasmania closes early

ANOTHER TWO LIBRARIES have been forced to open for shorter hours each week because of cuts in government spending.

The Hobart Lending Library and the State Reference Library, Tasmania, have reduced their opening hours on Saturdays to 10am-12noon. Saturday morning has traditionally been the busiest time of the week in the Hobart Lending Library. Activities for children in the Lending Library have also been reduced.