

# Front Line

John Levett  
President



I am writing this first Front Line of my term as the 36th President on the dreadful and portentous 15 January, realising as I do, that the world may have changed irrevocably between writing and publication, and that there were other issues impending which in many ways were more far-reaching in their implications than the agenda which I sit, peacefully, free from any threat, here to consider.

Whatever the sabre-rattlers do, however, there is another life which goes on, all across the earth; it is the life of the ordinary mortal, embedded in a thousand

different cultures, but all of them having at their base the individual preoccupation with the human condition, the daily challenges of being human, which can still be a very precarious undertaking in many less fortunate parts of the world.

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We humans, whatever our colour, our race, or our language, are all products of a culture; each of us is shaped and conditioned not only by our own personal histories, powerful and extraordinary though they often are, but more importantly, and often unconsciously but nevertheless powerfully, by the society within which our brief existence takes place.

In order to exist sanely, productively, effectively and with a modicum of happiness, we must understand ourselves; and we cannot understand ourselves simply by reference to our own

experiences. That is why solitary confinement is so powerful a punishment.

To make any sense at all of our existence, we must be able to relate our own experience of life to that of others. In many ways we do this most immediately by reference to other, contemporary, and adjacent individuals. This works, up to a point, and that point is passed when our intelligence, our imagination, raises a concept which is beyond the individual or collective wisdom, or knowledge of ourselves, or of those known to and accessible to us. Such problems can span the infinite spectrum of human complexity, and can encompass issues ranging from the emotional to the absolutely pragmatic.

It is at this point, which in my life seems to occur about four times a day, that one needs to refer to other, less immediate or accessible resources. These may occur in a number of forms and contexts, but for me and for many others, far more than the simple statistics of library use would indicate, the principal form is the book, and the essential context is the library.

Without these to guide us, much of life would be incomprehensible, many of its problems would be insoluble. And I move here beyond the sphere of the individual, important and fundamental though that is; what is said about individual needs can be

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extrapolated to groups, to families, to communities, to towns, to regions, to cities, to states and countries.

In all the manifestations of human aggregation which have occurred up to the present, the richest flowerings of the human spirit, the most effective ameliorations of the human condition — the thousand and one ills that we are heir to — have always been accompanied by the efflorescence of the book, and the cultivation of libraries, private or public.

The city, the state, the nation which neglects its libraries, neglects, in the end, itself. We, as a nation, are set upon at least a rhetorical course to make ourselves 'a clever country' — as if we were presently not a very bright one. We are going to move up from the lower seconds in the intellectual nation class-order to the upper sixth.

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Those national politicians who espouse this concept, and despite its rhetorical flavour, it is one well worth pursuing with serious intent, have so far not shown themselves to be very clever, thus lending force to their argument, I suppose, in that they have neglected to spell out for us what other, prerequisite conditions must attain before we move on to this much-to-be-desired condition.

For cleverness as a nation, is not, clearly, to be bought off the shelf, imported wholesale from some other, already 'clever' country. Nor can this condition of cleverness be dispensed holus-bolus from educational institutions which are a necessary but not sufficient ingredient in the process. 'Cleverness', which is current political cant for native intelligence, coupled with initiative, interbred with energy and enterprise, crossed with courage and self-confidence, cannot be drawn from the institutional pump, however well-primed it be.

National cleverness is not to be detached from individual competence, skill, humanity, confidence. You cannot educate a nation, you can only educate the individuals who choose to reside within its boundaries. And in the self-paced, self-motivated, self-directed acquisition of cleverness, the individual must have recourse to those great, effective encapsulations of experience, of ideas, of problems addressed and often solved, the books of the parent culture.

The novels, the car manuals; the poetry, the garden plans; the essays, the health guides; the wiring plans, the life-plans; the books on child-rearing, the treatise on caring for the aged. The entire panoply of human experience, light and tragic, rich and varied, informative and recitative, all may be found, in books, and in those most outstanding collections of books, those places which our society has created with such loving care, its libraries.

We have for too long entrusted the provision of these to our governments; we have assumed too carelessly that the essential benefits which libraries confer on their parent societies are self-evident and need no defending. As in education, we have tended to assume that those whom we have elected, and those whom we pay to administer and provide libraries have the necessary vision to sustain an effective and *justly* distributed level of service. We have allowed, I think, too many of our librarians to lose sight of their heritage, their trust and their calling; we have let them become, primarily, instruments of government, not servants of the people.

This is not their fault, it is ours. By not signalling more clearly, more effectively, more aggressively, that we hold these things dear, that there are differential judgements to be applied, that not all saved public dollars have a single value, we have conceded to them the initiative for making decisions not only about the matters which lie within their inarguable competence, but others of social justice, access and equity which are the responsibility of all of us. In so doing we have come close to forfeiting our right as active, interested, seriously concerned citizens, to a fair, a joint share in the challenge of making the essential, the hard decisions about what library services are to be provided where, at what levels, and by whom.

A meeting which I attended recently signals a revival of that interest in Adelaide. The overnight closure of some 30 branch libraries in Tasmania has created a reaction which suggests that at least some citizens in that State are no longer prepared to let the politicians, or the bureaucrats, set the agenda or determine the order of priorities for public libraries. ■

## ALIA and ACLIS open the door

Adelaide saw democracy at work on 18 January, when 500 people turned up at an ACLIS/ALIA sponsored public meeting to discuss controversial changes to the State Library.

The changes, rumoured for months, were confirmed in the *Report on the Development of a South Australian Library and Information Service*, which was circulated in mid-December with a 2-week response time.

The report gave rise to uproar in the media, and caused much concern within the library profession. The report was criticised for the timing, lack of consultation and lack of detail. Its major recommendations were:

- closing the State Library Lending Services
- negotiating with the Adelaide City Council to provide an alternative lending service
- making the reference collections available for direct loan to users.

As well, the report reaffirmed a recommendation from an earlier report proposing that local government take over the funding of the central operations of the public library network. This proposal caused concern for the future of the centralised selection, purchasing, cataloguing and processing functions.

The meeting aimed to highlight the issues and widen the consultation process. It was a resounding success. All the key players, including State and local government politicians, the Libraries Board, the library profession, the union and the user community were represented.

Under the chairmanship of ALIA national President, John Levett, introductory remarks were made by the Chairman of the Libraries Board, Des Ross, and ACLIS national President, Alison Crook. During the extended question time which followed, 35 people, mainly concerned library users, put comments and questions.

The clear messages that emerged were:

- the Lending Services should continue to be co-located with the Reference Services in the North Terrace complex;
- the Adelaide City Council should contribute to the funding of the Lending Services;
- direct lending from the Reference Collections should not occur;
- there must be no diminution of any public library services, whether in the metropolitan or country areas;
- opportunities for public input and debate on the issue must be extended.

In summarising the evening's proceedings, John Levett stated that 'what had been achieved in a completely unambiguous way was to open the door to further consultation.' ■

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