

# Wainwright's odyssey

## Lessons for Australia in developments overseas

At the ACT Branch Christmas dinner last year, Eric Wainwright, the Deputy Director-General of the National Library of Australia, spoke about an extended study tour he had just completed. He had visited 17 national libraries and other national organisations in eight countries in Europe and North America, and attended the IFLA Conference in Stockholm and the Information '90 Conference in Bournemouth, England.

He found that, even if the names are often the same, national libraries may have quite different aims and functions. These differences stem from differing patterns of historical development, the variety of relationships between public and private sectors of the 'information industry' in each country, and differing perceptions of the main purposes of national, government-funded libraries. Visiting so many institutions over a short period gave Eric an opportunity to draw out some general conclusions about library developments in Europe and North America, and their relevance to Australia. At *inCite's* request, Eric has summarised his address to the Branch, highlighting the main findings of his tour.

**Differences.** Eric was struck by the fact that no two institutions had the same range of responsibilities, and none the same as those of the National Library of Australia. For example, the National Library of New Zealand provides direct services to both public and school libraries. The National Library of Canada collects very little more than Canadian materials, specialising in the social sciences and humanities. At the other end of the spectrum the British Library, and to an even greater extent the Library of Congress, are still attempting to be comprehensive world-wide collectors in almost all languages. While all national libraries have a national heritage collecting role, they have very few, if any, other functions in common. This leads to the conclusion that our national Library can be what we wish it to be — it is largely an accident of history that its present functions are only those that are presently offered.

**Similarities.** Equally striking in such a variety of institutions was how similar were the problems listed by the chief executives and other senior staff. It appears to be a world-wide trend in the developed countries that libraries with national roles are:

- sustaining declines in real funding from their governments;
- attempting to raise more revenue from other sources;
- promoting their activities to the public and potential clients more directly and vigorously;
- reorganising their staff with the aim of increasing corporate cohesion, developing management capabilities and increasing efficiency and effectiveness;
- developing more formalised planning processes;

by Eric Wainwright



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- reassessing their information technology developments, usually as a result of ageing and unintegrated systems no longer being cost-effective, and inhibiting service improvements;
- developing more formalised collection development policies, including strategies for retention and preservation;
- forging more alliances with other libraries, networks and other parts of the book trade to achieve mutually beneficial objectives.

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These issues are discussed in detail below.

**Rise of Europe.** Australian librarians are generally relatively uninformed about library and information service developments in continental Europe, in comparison with those in North America and the United Kingdom, because of their poor command of languages other than English. It is clear that the European 1992 integration is acting as a catalyst for a major re-examination of practices at both the European Community and national levels. Individual countries are attempting to ensure that their services will remain competitive, while at the same time cooperating with each other to overcome the problems of standardisation. Europe will form the world's largest economic block, and the combined financial resources of the European countries are leading to massive developments

on a European-wide scale. Australian libraries will have to look to Europe as much as North America in the 1990s.

**Visibility.** There was remarkably little knowledge of Australian library services throughout North America and Europe. Even in New Zealand, knowledge of Australian activities was less than might have been expected. In part this seems due to the very low participation of Australian librarians in international bodies such as IFLA; in part also to the absence of reporting on Australian developments in media widely read overseas. Many areas of Australian library services stand comparison with any in the world — yet Australia is not seen as an obvious source of information, assistance, consultancy and information-related products by developing countries or by trading partners. This must be to Australia's long-term disadvantage — we urgently need to examine ways in which Australian knowledge can be imparted more widely overseas.

**Research and Development.** Australian libraries suffer greatly from the lack of funds for research and development relating to library and information services. European Community funds are giving a large impetus to research in European libraries. In the United States (from which Canada also benefits) there are many great resources of government research funding for libraries and also significant resources available through private organisations such as the Mellon Foundation and the Council for Library Resources. All institutions visited which had 'leading edge' developments had significant applied research projects funded from outside grants or from internal allocations for research purposes. The contrast with Australia was striking, and much work needs to be done by ACLIS, ALIA and major libraries to increase the amount of applied research of benefit to Australian libraries as a whole.

**Decentralisation and devolution.** An interesting phenomenon in Europe, and to a more limited extent in North America, was the move away from the idea of a national library as a single entity providing all services. This general idea is manifesting itself in a number of forms:

- physical decentralisation — for example, the National Libraries of Norway, Sweden and Finland have all recently established divisions outside their capital cities, with significant parts of their operations in small towns where space and labour is cheaper. The British Library is similarly relocating significant parts of its London operations to its Boston Spa division in Yorkshire. The new French organisation INIST has been formed from the amalgamation of two older Parisian organisations and re-located in Nancy, 300 kilometres east of Paris.
- creation of subsidiaries — for example, INIST has formed a fully-owned company,

INIST-Diffusion, to provide information retrieval and document delivery services based on the INIST collections. In Holland, the PICA Network has been spun off from the Royal Library in a new location as a fully-owned subsidiary of the National Library and a number of universities.

- contracting of services delivery — there were many examples, e.g. the British Library's agreement with several commercial publishers regarding publishing and marketing of its publications; the PICA Network's agreement with both the Royal Library and Dutch booksellers to output both national and trade bibliographies from the network; the Library of Congress's agreement with OCLC for the provision of copy cataloguing; the National Library of Canada's agreement with several universities for production of cataloguing-in-publication records, liaison with local publishers on collection building, and marketing of a joint CD-ROM with the Canadian Publishers Agency; and the Deutsche Bibliothek's marketing of its online cataloguing service through STN, a commercial database host.

- contracting of non-core operations — again many examples, e.g. British Library contracting to a commercial bureau a large part of its computing support, and the creation of cataloguing-in-publication records to a commercial organisation; PICA Network's agreement with the University's national network SURFNET to manage its communications.

- strategic alliances between potentially competitive organisations — for example, the National Library of Canada and CISTI joint operation of the DOBIS shared cataloguing facility, the agreement of OCLC and the Research Libraries Group to exchange a variety of bibliographical data, and the Association of Research Libraries' recent agreement with EDUCOM to form the Coalition on Networked Information.

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In toto all these examples represent a process of reassessment by national organisations of their real missions and how best these may be achieved. Libraries in this country need to be more flexible in considering the purchase of external services, joint ventures, and strategic alliances, rather than attempting to duplicate skills which other bodies can provide more effectively.

Planning and organisation. As the National Library has recently put a considerable effort into its corporate planning processes, it was comforting to find that most

libraries were engaged in a similar exercise, and that few had made very much more progress. Strategic planning and performance evaluation has been forced on many institutions by government directives, and it is clear that most were still having difficulties of adjusting, with problems of lack of skills amongst middle management, difficulties regarding the values and attitudes in the organisation, an inability to integrate strategic planning with the normal budget setting processes and difficulties in clearly establishing priorities at a time of financial stringency. Most of the libraries visited had restructured their organisation in recent years towards more delegation of decision-making and financial authority but nowhere did the process appear to be fully integrated with the processes of program evaluation and individual performance assessment. With strategic planning in vogue, it was interesting that two of the apparently happiest and most progressive institutions that Eric visited appeared to have a very authoritarian decision-making process — which made him think hard about the differences between leadership and management.

(This summary merely touches on some general issues in Eric's talk. A full report on his tour, which covers more specific issues such as national bibliography, document delivery, collection development and preservation, image management and networking, is available from him at the National Library of Australia, telephone (06) 262 1377.) □

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