

The challenge of tolerance for Australian Libraries

Jennifer Cram comments on the *International Year for Tolerance*

The Mission Statement states that 1995 has been proclaimed *United Nations Year for Tolerance*, on the grounds that tolerance is an essential factor for world peace.

The naming of the year implies that tolerance is the corollary of intolerance. Intolerance is still one of the greatest challenges for Australian Libraries, which in numerous ways are not the open, accepting, liberal institutions we would imagine they are. But spending this year looking for ways to be more tolerant is not the answer.

I'm in full agreement with Aboriginal people who have said to me that they don't want to be merely 'tolerated' and with Sanford Berman, who, when I asked him about his reaction to the year commented...

'I must confess to some irritation with 'tolerance' [as in International Year of] since it doesn't suggest respecting or valuing other cultures and peoples, but merely putting up with them. It actually implies that what you're 'tolerating' is distasteful, maybe repulsive.'

Berman has for decades been a tireless campaigner to remove bias from Library of Congress (LC) Subject headings and is thus a thorn in the side of the Library of Congress people who invent same. He demonstrates his commitment, not by whingeing about the inappropriateness of the headings while slavishly using them, but by implementing new headings, forwarding them to LC, and lobbying vigorously for their adoption. At last, sometimes 20 years on, LC is starting to use his headings.

Australia, alas, lags somewhat behind in this regard. Various attempts to detail 'Australian' subject headings have not made their way into the definitive LC list. Yet we slavishly follow that list. So most Australian libraries have no subject headings for important events in the history of Australia's indigenous inhabitants, and many of the headings which we do use are misleading, or insulting, or both to all sorts of people.

LC has no heading recognition, for instance, of 'rights' in general or land and water rights in particular, nor any headings for *Cultural imperialism* or *Neocolonialism*.

At Hennepin County Library (HCL), Berman has introduced what he refers to as a bevy of 'resistance and revolts' descriptors that might be useful elsewhere, for example, *Native American resistance and revolts*, *Women's resistance and revolts*, *African resistance and revolts*, *Slave resistance and revolts*.

While HCL has not introduced *Australian Aboriginal resistance and revolts* as a heading (they have little *Australiana*), Berman suspects that such a heading would work too.

During *International Year for the World's Indigenous People*, ALIA celebrated the year in *inCite*, and we recognised our need for a policy statement on Services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But that policy has not eventuated, having become bogged down in ways which I cannot really understand, but which appear to relate to rampant committeeism. What has happened is that all reference to indigenous people has been removed from the statement on multicultural services (which I applaud) but without being replaced, so in effect, to the casual observer, we have erased indigenous people from the organisation.

People are human first, and women, or men or gay, or disabled, or indigenous or members of a particular ethnic or community group or occupation second. Race, religion, national origin, or occupation do not define us, they are only a part of us. We are human first and any of those other things second.

Yet, despite our assertions to the contrary, there is still strong, hostile, and deep resistance and opposition to multiculturalism and to indigenous people in our society and in our libraries. Some of it is direct and palpable. Every week brings another 'them and us' article in the press, or a story of legal rulings that display the ethnocentric or gendered nature of our courts. Some of it is deep and subtle. Like the deceptive definitions that we apply in our catalogues, definitions which bias the library user against either the materials or the topics, and reflect the language, experience and viewpoint of pre multi-cultural, pre-reconciliation Australia. A republic might be on the national agenda, but the mores of the Empire are alive and well in our catalogues.

We continue to perpetuate this situation by failing to promptly create and begin using headings for topics actually appearing in the materials we add to our collections and by failing to reform inaccurate, biased and defamatory headings. These failures demonstrate our dependence on LC.

But we also obscure or hide important aspects of materials in our libraries by failing to assign headings that are already 'official'. In the name of productivity and efficiency, undercataloguing seems to be a growing problem.

No real progress in providing library services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was made in 1993. The profession adopted the tokenist 'festival' approach which is our norm—we celebrate other cultures for our 'core' clientele, white, middle-class 'Australian' Australians, rather than serve individuals from those cultures equitably.

A great deal of concern has been expressed about the *Racial vilification bill* and its possible effect on libraries. Censorship is appearing in a number of areas on a level we have not seen for decades, so there is no reason to suppose it may not apply to library stock. The racial vilification law will provide a perfect opportunity. It is important that libraries retain materials which show all sides of the question. It is the library collection, rather than the individual item, which best preserves the opportunity for people to learn salutary lessons from past horrors. If we continue to show bias by our catalogues, we will have no defence when the thought police march into the library and confiscate copies of the material which show us the ugly face of intolerance and its consequences.

But let's not stop there. The face of the profession does not reflect the face of the community, and if you do not read and write English adequately the service most libraries provide is very basic, lacking adequate catalogues, adequate stocks and adequate reference and information services, let alone equitable ones.

The *Year for Tolerance* should not be celebrated by the profession's continued toleration of inequity in our libraries. This inequity is morally insupportable. It is also dangerous. In times of economic restraint, elitist use of public funding provides easy justification for withdrawal of that funding. ■