

A special association



Mairéad Brown

ALIA president

They say that as you get older you feel time goes more quickly. If that's true then I must be very old! I took up the position of president on 1 January 2000 with a unique term of office spanning ALIA under a Royal Charter and as an incorporated body. And now, already, even with an extended term it is the turn of Alan Bundy to take up the president's position.

I had always recognised that ALIA was a special kind of association, perhaps because there were always kindred spirits and a feeling of family created by shared values, work experiences and dreams of what we can contribute to society and the welfare of individuals. The privilege of being president for a period has however opened my eyes to other features of ALIA. Firstly, as a professional association it is solidly based, well run and commands respect in the ranks of professional associations. We can be proud of the Association and what it achieves. Secondly, the Association has shown itself capable of adapting to changed times and to increase its capacity to provide what the members want, as the external environment impacts on our operations and on our needs for support.

The openness to change by the membership was well demonstrated at the National Policy Congress (NPC) in May 2000. The delegates not only said they wanted change, they overwhelmingly supported the move to a radical restructure for grass-roots activity. It must be admitted that some of the NPC recommendations provided major challenges to the new Board of Directors in terms of implementation. The Board sometimes felt it had been asked to do the impossible. But we got there and are now implementing a new way of organising ourselves through self-nominating groups. A truly exciting time lies ahead as we reap the benefits of sweeping away the division structure which required far too much of our energy.

But it won't all be plain sailing from here. We still have to test the new approach to organising ourselves and, doubtless, there will be need over the next few years to nip and tuck. I know the Board of Directors, with the superb assistance of ALIA National Office staff and the executive director, will continue to listen and work with members to make the new ALIA work — we are partners in this endeavour, so let us work generously as partners do to get it working effectively.

Looking back over my year and a bit as president, there are many happenings that stand out. As suggested earlier, the first NPC was exhilarating. Establishing a *modus operandi* for operating governance through a Board rather than a Council was a lot of fun. The visits to divisions were, without exception, rewarding. The welcome I received across the country indicated a huge depth of loyalty and commitment to ALIA. As a representative of the Board of Directors, I was very grateful for the opportunity to experience what it is like at the local level and to be able to feed your comments and ideas back to the Board.

But while we have certainly achieved a remarkable amount in the last few years, there are many significant challenges ahead. I learnt on a study trip to Washington DC last year that associations worldwide are having to make major changes in what they do and how they do it. ALIA needs to continue to develop the range of tangibles it delivers to members so that 'value for money' is apparent when those renewal forms arrive. This will require investment and some delicately balanced budgetary strategy. Not unrelated to this need to deliver benefits that individual members can appreciate is the need to capitalise on our CPD and mentoring programs. We have frameworks for these that are second to none in terms of what professional associations provide. But because we have been preoccupied in maintaining the old division structure, the energy and resourcing have not always been there to provide impetus to keep CPD and mentoring going at the optimum level.

In closing, I would like to thank members for the support they have shown to ALIA and its Board. We have had grumbles here and there — to be expected in any diverse organisation, especially in a time of change. But overwhelmingly the membership has come behind the Board and let it get on with the job of renewing ALIA and mapping out our strategic agenda. Some of the outcomes of the Board's work are not yet generally visible but, as the year rolls on, further changes — of the kind you say you want to see — will be there. As I become, once more, a rank-and-file member of ALIA I look forward to the continuing revitalisation of our Association and to enjoying the benefits of the changes we have introduced in recent times. ■

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