

Support from the top at PM&C library*

Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C)

I'm often asked what exactly I do at work, and not just by people in this department. The question is frequently posed to me by those who don't quite know what a public servant working on 'policy' does all day (and, unfortunately and inaccurately, sometimes infers that the true answer is 'very little').

My responses vary. Sometimes I talk about public service values and ethics. Sometimes about the structures of governance. But, on occasion, I emphasise the fact that we turn information into knowledge which can inform decision making by elected government.

The challenge is that the amount of information available to us is growing exponentially. When I was in my ivory tower, I searched for the meaning of life (or whether Edward Bellamy was a utopian economist) in books and journals and manuscripts. Knowledge came from libraries and archives. It was paper-based.

The internet has changed all that. When we need help getting quick access to information from around the world, we go to the director of PM&C's Information Resource Management. Debrah Lewis and her small team do a wonderful job in helping us find what we need to do our jobs.

But Debrah, like me, remains committed to providing *library* services. It's for that reason that PM&C made its modest contribution to Australian Library and Information Week in May. And it's why I made my even more modest contribution by reading to a well-behaved group of staff some selections I had stumbled upon while browsing around the PM&C Library. It was, at least for me, fun.

I chose readings that highlighted why I was so grateful for the stomp craze in the 1960s; why Robert Menzies thought that the steadfast virtues of Englishmen were so misunderstood; and why Fred Daly preferred to take tax off beer rather than contraceptives (my first

introduction to Australian politics when I arrived here in 1972). The library found for me (on PARLINFO) the Senate Estimates hearings in 1990 when Senator Bronwyn Bishop questioned me on what I knew of the Princess of Wales' bust. I even found an evocative poem on Cathy Freeman's victory in the 400 metres at the Sydney Olympics.

Most importantly, perhaps, I directed attention to our extraordinary collection of Prime Ministerial speeches dating back to 1940. I am very pleased that some 12 000 paper transcripts are now being digitalised so that in the future they will be more readily available to researchers. I hope that we will have an online dissemination system ready to launch at the opening of One National Circuit [the department's new building due for opening in December 2006].

The reading was a good way to recognise the importance of libraries as providers of services. Our library, while small, holds a remarkable wealth of material across numerous subject areas and has access to far more resources online.

The motto is '*PM&C Library Services — here to help you do your job*'. In my experience, they do!

For further details about the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, go to <http://www.dpmc.gov.au>.

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Dr Peter Shergold addressing departmental staff during Library and Information Week in May



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