

Cuban Cocktail: IFLA in Havana



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The IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) 60th Conference was held 21-27 August 1994, in Havana, Cuba. The theme of the Conference was "Libraries and Society".

The Conference was attended by 1500 delegates from all over the world, from a huge variety of libraries, including United Nations libraries, national and parliamentary libraries. I was the only Australian law librarian attending. Other attendees from Australia included the National Librarian, the Librarian of the National Gallery Research Library, and several academics from Schools of Library and Information Science.

Librarians from the US Library of Congress had to obtain special permission from the State Department to attend. There were also difficulties for other American librarians in travelling to Cuba, as a plane was turned back from Miami with a suspected bomb on board.

The Conference was very well organized. As part of the preparations, recognizing that communications with Havana might be difficult, IFLA, with the assistance of the National Library of Canada, established an e-mail link on the Internet. This will be expanded across the broader membership, to form IFLANET.

A full set of Conference papers was provided to every delegate on arrival. This was a significant achievement, given the acute shortage of paper in Cuba (the Swedish Government donated a million sheets of paper), and is something that Australian library AND law conferences would do well to emulate. All papers were available in either English or Spanish. Simultaneous oral translations were provided into English, Spanish, French, German and Russian. The Conference was well covered in the Cuban media, as there is a great interest and emphasis in Cuba on education and universal literacy.

Overseas delegates were met by IFLA representatives at the airport, and were well looked after by guides from the Cuban government tourist agency, who were available in every hotel. Delegates were quite free to walk around and explore Havana, and the taxi service was excellent, as drivers will turn the meter off if they have to wait for you! Hotel standards are very similar to ours, although

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plumbing and electricity supply can be a little erratic. Tours which had been arranged as part of the conference were well-organized and interesting, and I spent an extra week in Cuba after the Conference, visiting Santiago de Cuba, Vinales, and Cayo Largo

The Conference itself was held in Havana's Palacio de Las Convenciones, a relatively modern building by Havana standards, set in extensive and beautiful gardens. The Conference programme reflected the various Divisions of IFLA, and sections within the Divisions, for example, the Division of Special Libraries contained the Sections of Government Libraries, Social Sciences Libraries and libraries in other subject areas. The Division of General Research Libraries contained the Section of Parliamentary Libraries, and the Section of University and other General Research Libraries. There is also a Division of Regional Activities, into which Australia fits as part of Asia and Oceania.

I attended papers in all of these sections, as well as papers on management and an excellent day-long session on information technology, which covered everything from "How to get started on the Internet" to telecommunications, including satellites and digital transmission by radio, and satphones - hand-held satellite telephones. A floppy disk entitled "Internet stuff" was given to each delegate containing, among other items, the full text of US Vice-President Al Gore's paper on the global information structure, and another paper on the US national information infrastructure. I have the disk, and can copy it or print out copies if anyone requires them.

The session on family law which was run by the International Association of Law Librarians was disappointing, as one of the speakers was not able to come. A very interesting paper on the family law in the Commonwealth Caribbean was given by John Dyrud, from the University of the West Indies in Barbados. Interestingly, many islands of the Commonwealth Caribbean have adopted sections of Australian family law, and amalgamated it with Roman Dutch law, customary law, and religious law.

I attended the workshop for parliamentary librarians, which was coordinated by the Deputy Director, Senior Specialist in Public Policy, Congressional Research Service, US Library of Congress. At this workshop I also met the Librarian of the House of Commons Library, England (she pre-empted Glenda Jackson at the recent Women, Power and Politics Conference in Adelaide by telling me that the House of Commons has a shooting gallery and a men's barber, but no facilities for women!), and the parliamentary librarians of France, Sweden, Spain, Chile, Peru, Russia (accompanied by her own interpreter), South Africa, India, and Canada. All were very friendly and welcoming to me. With them I visited the Library of the Cuban National Assembly which, despite the importance of its role, can no longer print current awareness bulletins for the members of the Assembly because of the paper shortage; and I later attended a reception at which a small gift from the Library of Congress was presented.

The Spanish Parliamentary Librarian had told the law librarian from the University of Havana that an Australian law librarian was at the Conference, and he made a special effort to come to the Conference the next day to meet me. We talked with the help of an interpreter. The University of Havana was founded in 1791. The Law Faculty has 45 professors and 800 students. They are currently preparing courses on law and social issues.

Lawyers seem to belong to a union of lawyers. Family problems seem very similar to ours, with the added issue that men seem to run away to supposedly greener pastures in the United States, leaving the women and children. We also heard from two young (female) tour guides that in Cuba there are five women to every man, and certainly a bit of a sex industry was evident in the tourist hotels. This does not bode well for Cuba when combined with shortages of food, medicines, and the means to distribute information about sexually transmitted disease. It may well be that women are bearing the brunt of the economic blockade, although, as my colleague from the National Gallery has since remarked, it was curious in the light of the shortages of really essential things, that commodities such as nail polish seemed to be plentiful - although this may be because it isn't edible!

The law librarian, Señor Castaneda, kindly gave me copies of the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, and the Penal, Criminal and Family Codes, together with copies of the Gazettes with which the codes are up-dated. I have deposited these with the Law Library of the University of Sydney. In return I have sent him a copy of the Australian Constitution, a book on legal research and one on legal problem solving, and a book from the "Issues for the Nineties" series, entitled *When Families Break Down*.

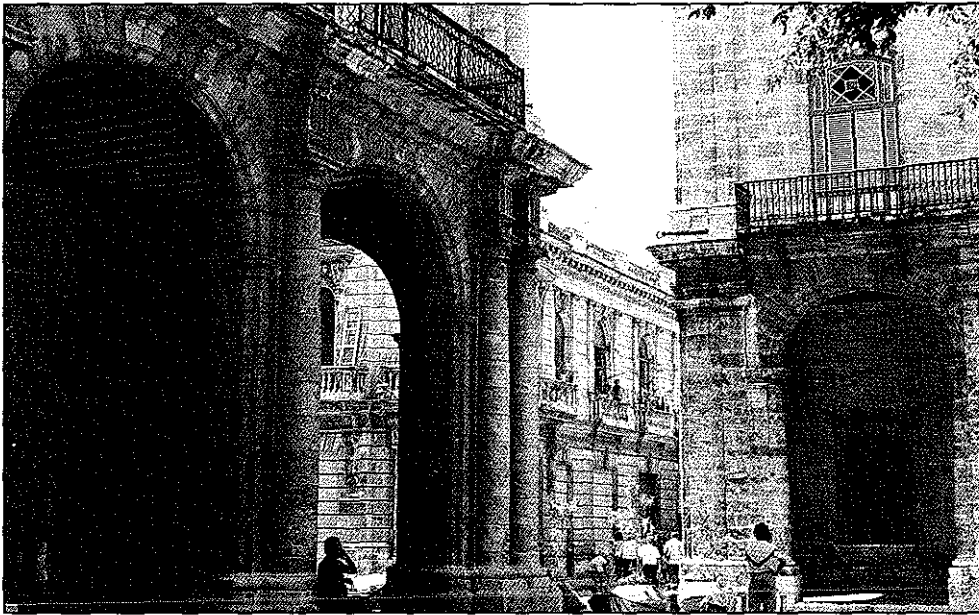
If anyone would like to donate materials (not so much books, which would need to be in Spanish to be really useful, but office supplies such as floppy disks, paper, pens etc.), the Law Librarian's name and address is:

Lic. Rene Gonzalez Castaneda
Director de la Biblioteca
Universidad de la Habana
Facultad de Derecho
San Lazaro y L., Vedado
Plaza de la Revolucion
Ciudad de la Habana, CUBA
Codigo Postal 10600

There is, however, no certainty that materials will reach the addressee intact, because the postal service does not seem to be reliable. A member of the Australia-Cuba Friendship Society told me that he sent a parcel to a family, containing new clothes and shoes, and it arrived with these items having been replaced by old ones, but a letter containing a US\$100 bill untouched! If anyone has any ideas to avoid this and minimise freight costs I would be glad of suggestions.

Impressions of Cuba

Due to the US economic blockade of Cuba, the effects of which have intensified since Russian aid ceased three years ago, (indeed, the Russian legacy seems to be little but a cult of dependency, and some hideous examples of Soviet architecture!) food is rationed, and there are acute shortages of medicines, paper, soap, and other consumer items which we take for granted. I have recently heard from a colleague at the (British) Library Association that the Association has passed a resolution of solidarity with Cuba, and is arranging to send books and other materials. I have joined the Australia-Cuba Friendship Society, which sends work brigades and raises funds to buy medicines and other items as requested by contacts in Cuba.



Corner of main square in Old Havana

The Cubans I met did not view Fidel Castro as a tyrant as is suggested by the CNN reports - in fact one man said "We love him like a father - we just do not like to tell him it is time to go" - just like any 68 year-old man having problems about retirement! They admire him for what he has achieved - and it is worth remembering that Cuba has a long history of fighting for independence and autonomy - Fidel is certainly not the first and only revolutionary Cuba has ever known. Fidel does not seem to encourage a personality cult based around him. There are few pictures of him, and no statues, although there are many mementos of Che Guavera, including T-shirts and badges which are sold as souvenirs (yes, I bought a Che badge). A 19th century revolutionary and poet, Jose Marti (after whom the National Library and Havana's airport are named) is still deeply revered. UNESCO is sponsoring a big celebration in his honour next year.

Despite the poverty, Cubans are warm, generous, friendly and genuinely proud of their country. The atmosphere is peaceful, and police and military presence are minimal (although I was prevented by a young chap with what looked like a machine gun from inviting into the Palacio de las Convenciones a nice woman who had guided me when I was lost between the Trade Exhibition Centre and the Palacio - I only wanted to buy her a cup of coffee, but this was forbidden). People seem to be free to comment openly on the political situation, and are well-informed and analytical about it. CNN and Radio "Free" America are broadcast into Cuba (and it hijacks all the other channels from the satellites), so we had the strange experience of watching CNN in hotels overlooking the very coast where people were being shown on CNN leaving Cuba in droves on rafts - virtual reality.



Street scene in Old Havana

Havana is still a mysterious, beautiful, and voluptuous, if incredibly dilapidated, city "La grandeur de la decadence" as one French librarian put it. I am told that Havana is not typical of Cuba, and that in order to know the "real" Cuba it is necessary to go into the countryside, but I found Havana intriguing anyway. Interestingly, a new perfume for men called "Havana" (by Aramis) has just come on the market in time for Christmas. It does not smell like rum and cigars, as one might expect, and is not even particularly evocative of Havana, although very pleasant. Perhaps Cuba should get its trade practices lawyers (if it has any) going, to obtain some foreign exchange in return for the use of the name!

Ernest Hemingway is remembered fondly, and it is possible to visit the house he occupied which is still maintained as it was when he lived there, as well as La Floridita and the Bodeguita del Medio, two bars he frequented.

Cuban coffee (for the benefit of Nick Pengelley and other junkies) is an excellent drop. I also discovered (and consumed rather a lot of) the delightful *mojito* - a cooling drink made of sugar syrup, lemon juice, rum, crushed mint and mineral water.

Libraries are plentiful, to judge by the number of Cuban librarians who attended the Conference. There is an incredible amount of ingenuity on the part of teachers and librarians in ensuring that literacy levels are maintained despite the lack of even the most basic teaching materials - as much ingenuity as evidently goes into maintaining the 1940s and 50s cars still driven around Havana! The biggest problem for librarians seems to be the lack of foreign exchange, and limited local funding for acquisitions (as well as availability of local materials to buy). Museums are well-endowed, and extremely interesting, although sight-seeing can be very tiring in Havana's heat and humidity, as there is no air-conditioning. We kept having to stop for more *mojitos*.



Two salmon pink cars outside the Museo de Arte Colonial

Conclusion

The most stimulating and valuable aspect of the Conference was the opportunity to meet and talk to colleagues from a wide range of political backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints, especially those from Eastern Europe and South America. This was my idea of heaven - a different fascinating conversation at every meal! Their opinions on the social, political and economic changes being wrought in their countries were varied, but in general, as far as libraries and librarianship are concerned, the changes seem to be quite positive: more work, more jobs, more opportunities. On the other hand, it was distressing to learn, from a video which was shown to the Conservators' Section, that the National Library of the former Yugoslavia in Sarajevo, a collection dating back to mediaeval times, has been almost totally destroyed.

I have a large number of business cards from many librarians I met from a range of countries, as well as the list of participants at the Conference, with their addresses, phone, fax and e-mail numbers, so if you are travelling overseas, and want a contact name, I may be able to provide one.

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Future IFLA Conferences are:

61st : IFLA 1995. Theme: *Libraries of the Future* Istanbul. 20-26 August, 1995

62nd : IFLA 1996. Theme: *The Challenge: Libraries and Economic Development* Beijing, 25-31 August, 1996

The 50th Anniversary of the United Nations is in 1995, and the International Association of Law Librarians is planning something at IFLA as part of the celebrations. The person to contact about this is Larry Wenger, Law Librarian at the University of Virginia, 580 Massie Road, Charlottesville, VA 22903-1789, USA, ph: (804) 924 3384 or fax: (804) 982 2232

Unfortunately the Istanbul conference clashes with the Sixth Asian-Pacific Special, Health and Law Librarians' Conference, 27-30 August 1995, so I suggest that we start planning for a delegation of Australian law librarians to attend the Beijing Conference, as part of Australia's increasingly important role in the Asia-Pacific region



A park in Old Havana with Royal palms (the national tree of Cuba)

Photographs used in this article compliments of Frank Rabry (National Library of New Zealand) p 341-343, and Sandy Nolman (British Library Association) p 344