Libraries in the political landscape

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Librarians have an interesting perspective of the 10 November federal election. We are at least more familiar than most with the concepts of 'information economy' and 'knowledge nation' which underly the policies of the Coalition and the Australian Labor Party respectively. The spaghetti and meatballs diagram in the *Knowledge nation* document might have bewildered Alan Ramsey of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, but it holds no surprises for library and information workers who daily make linkages between diverse information sources and users and who have been exploiting the opportunities of digital information and communication since the 1970s.

An examination of the issues and policies affecting the library and information sector shows us how far the Australian information society has come in the last decade and how effectively we have positioned libraries up to now, even in times of budget cuts and fluctuating currency values, as key players. The traditional placement of libraries and information services in political portfolios of arts or education remains. There is now also political recognition of the expertise of library professionals and the strategic role of libraries and information services in the development of a sophisticated information society.

Reports like *Australia as an information society: the role of libraries/information networks* in 1991 and *Navigating the economy of knowledge* in 1995 highlighted the potential for libraries in this transformation. During the early nineties the Federal Labor government funded the introduction of computers in schools and school librarians were themselves important resources in instructing staff and students in their use.

The Howard government has concentrated on the expansion and strengthening of regional telecommunications infrastructure. In its *Networking the nation* and *Strategic framework for the information economy*, the Coalition has taken e-commerce as the focus for skilling Australians as students, entrepreneurs and consumers in a digital environment. It set up the National Office of the Information Economy to publicise, co-ordinate and monitor implementation of government policy (http://www.noie.gov.au). It also introduced legislation to support electronic commerce, the digital amendments and the introduction of moral rights for creators to the *Copyright Act* and extension of privacy protection to personal data in the private sector has passed without controversy.

What are the issues relevant to the library and information sector in this election?

Resourcing

At the time of writing, the government has not released budget details. However there are observable differences in the major party policies which will impact on the resourcing of libraries and on how libraries can attract those resources.

The Coalition will continue its policy of constructing specific programs to meet specific goals, with short and medium-term funding commitments. The emphasis will continue to be the facilitation of e-commerce and of the entrepreneurial opportunities offered by digital information technology. These priorities are clearly listed in the document, entitled *Heading in the right direction*, which details by portfolio the government's programs and achievements (available at the Liberal Party website, at http://www.liberal.org.au/RIGHTD%7E1.DOC). The library and information sector has had to, and will need to re-position itself continuously, against these priorities in order to attract resources.

The Labor Party has taken a broader philosophical approach. They argue that the advances we have made are disconnected and that, as a result, we are under-performing at many levels. The *Knowledge Nation* (KN) policy (at http://www.alp.org.au/kn/) requires the Commonwealth government to co-ordinate with State governments, educational institutions and industry to identify all existing knowledge resources, to create or strengthen links between those resources, to give practical encouragement to research and innovation and to improve education at all levels. This is a far reaching post-industrial society plan co-ordinated like postwar reconstruction. The role of library and information services is fundamental to the success of many of the initiatives outlined in this policy, but specifically referred to in the national information policy recommendation.

Part of the *Knowledge nation* is the commitment by the Shadow Minister for Education, Michael Lee, to improve access to online journals by supporting national site with publishers licences for all Australian universities. This reduces costs and enables smaller and regional universities to have access to new titles.

Access and equity

The Coalition, the ALP, the Australian Democrats and the Greens all subscribe to the need for access to information and the reduction of the divide between information rich and poor. Through ALIA lobbying, the Coalition has funded public libraries to provide internet access and training to the broad community.

An Australian Bureau of Statistics report on the *Household use of information technology* in 2000 shows that 3.3 million households in Australia still do not have a home computer and 4.8 million do not have home internet access. Most affected are those households with incomes under $50 000 a year. ABS statistics on *Public libraries* (ABS 8561.0) showed that, at the end of June last year, local government libraries had 5220 personal computers for public use with 2832 internet workstations. Thanks to government funding (and ALIA lobbying) this is an increase of 242 per cent in three years, but it falls far short of equity of access to internet information for half the Australian population.

The ALP's national information policy to ensure, amongst many other goals, a concentration on access and equity in securing knowledge and a narrowing of the information divide. Its diversion of some funds from private to public education is part of that commitment.

Telecommunications

The Howard government has prioritised the telecommunication needs of regional and remote areas. It says that the completion of the sale of Telstra is necessary to fund further infrastructure and to reduce commercial costs and that service will be guaranteed by the social responsibility charter, presently in place.

Labor, the Greens and the Australian Democrats oppose further privatisation of Telstra in order to ensure its public interest role and effective government monitoring. The Democrats also have a specific policy opposing deregulation of Australia Post [http://www.democrats.org.au].

For the library and information sector, the reliability, cost and improvement of telecommunications are increasingly ▶

▶ important both for information access and for delivery to off-site clients.

Copyright

With other groups, ALIA fought hard to retain the present definition of libraries within the *Copyright Act*, in order to maintain the resource sharing between publicly funded libraries and those non-profit libraries within business. We also argued for retention of the balance of copyright owner/public interest in using digital information. The government is now reviewing these decisions in the light of copyright owners' predictions that they require more protection in digital information transmission.

Goods and Services Tax

With Australian booksellers and publishers, ALIA supports the removal of the GST on books and on serials. For smaller libraries, the compliance cost of administering this system continues to be a significant burden. The subscription agents who handle many of the complexities of serials acquisition on behalf of libraries also find compliance a burden, particularly the failure of the Australian Tax Office to supply consistent rulings on cross-border transactions. For the majority of libraries, the tax is claimed back and therefore contributes nothing to government revenue.

The ALP has promised not to raise the GST rate and to look at roll-back options. Given the reductions in the federal budget surplus, such rollbacks are likely to be limited. However, the ALP has promised to simplify compliance for small business which should benefit many libraries and library associated businesses.

The Australian Democrats and the Greens support the removal of the GST on books.

Censorship and privacy

ALIA argued against moves to follow United States policy in tying government funding to mandated internet filtering. We support the self-regulation regime for internet content and service providers contained in the *Broadcasting Services (Online Services) Act*.

There are, however, some disturbing developments in the United States in the wake of the tragic events of 11 September and counter-terrorism policies. These include efforts at censoring general news and internet communications and the use of digital technology to track library records. The American Library Association has drawn attention to the dangers of this legislation and is lobbying US senators with some success. None of this is an Australian election issue. However, given that the concept of mandatory filtering in libraries was imported from the United States into our political debate, it is worth noting.

Global issues

The World Trade Organisation is committed to freeing-up trade in services. Our colleagues in the Canadian Library Association have raised the issue of library services. In informal talks with Australian trade officials, we have been assured that library services are not part of the agenda in these discussions. ALIA will continue to monitor this situation.

Positioning of libraries

Whoever wins the federal election and whatever the balance of power, librarians must pursue actively the strategies which will ensure their maximum contribution to a society based on opportunity, knowledge and democracy, values which have always fuelled our professional development. ■

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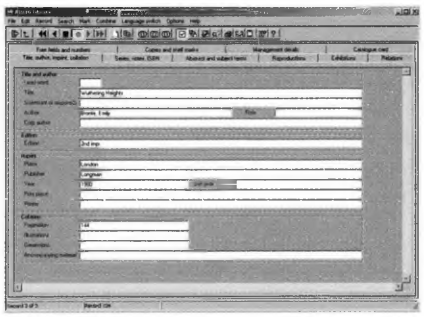

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