

The task ahead

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Australians have voted for a coalition government with control of the House of Representatives, and a Senate where the policies of the opposition parties will have considerable influence.

In the November issue of *inCite*, we published a summary of the various party policies which affected our sector, a statement from the Coalition specifically addressing their priorities in education and information access and our own blueprint for advancing the information needs of our community, *Connecting Australians*. Detailed responses were not received from the Australian Labor Party and Australian Democrats. The Greens were supportive of our policy aims.

The post-Budget 2001 news coming out of the government departments we work with was that there was 'no money' for programs. Where surplus budget funds were being directed became evident in the lead up to and during the election campaign. The competition for funds and program support will be strong over the next eighteen months as the government meets the financial costs of its commitments to border protection and military support to the United States of America. The next eighteen months will also reveal whether this third term government has a policy reform agenda, though it is a safe bet that removing the GST on books and serials will not be part of it. Our task is now to see how we can advance the priorities of *Connecting Australians* in the new Parliament, against the wider environment of economic uncertainty and international insecurity.

To take one example, all of us wish to bridge the digital divide and the government has targeted rural and remote areas for special resourcing, including the expansion of public library internet access in those areas. However, in our policy

document, we note the urban Australians who are also struggling to access quality, up-to-date information services. We acknowledge the Coalition's commitment to resourcing public libraries as part of their 'bridging the divide' strategy, and we will work for specific grant funding to establish the public library as the focal community access point for publicly available electronic information and government interactive electronic resources.

Equitable pricing of telecommunications services, reliable connections and adequate bandwidth are essential to the needs and interests of all Australians in the information society. In what promises to be a stimulating debate on T3, the sale of the third tranche of Telstra shares, the government and opposition parties will reveal what they consider to be acceptable levels of service and performance, particularly in rural areas.

One of the needs of government to improve decision-making and policy setting relevant to our sector is ongoing statistical series information. Recurrent funding for statistical information about the use of, access to and gaps in information services is essential and we have committed ourselves to work for recurrent government funding for that information.

The federal government has promised funding for a global summit of online education and training networks early next year and we intend to promote the participation of our sector.

The review of copyright legislation is ongoing but a particular focus on the digital environment is anticipated in the second half of 2002. One of the key issues is a push by rights holders to have a definition of 'library' included to cover libraries in for profit organisations and thereby exclude them from current copyright exemptions. We will be

working with members during next year to collect evidence to support our arguments against such a move and to illustrate the impact the removal of the exemption would have on access to information in the whole of our sector, not just in for profit organisations.

It is also expected that legislation covering the regulation of online services at the federal level will be reviewed in late 2002. The key task for our sector in preparation for the review is to collect evidence on public access to the internet, the use of filters and user complaints about online content. Our ICT policy officer Michelle Baird undertook a preliminary survey at the recent ALIA Public Libraries Conference and will be conducting a more comprehensive survey early next year. We are also monitoring and responding to state legislation picking up on the federal legislation on regulation of online services starting to flow through — South Australia and New South Wales are currently under consideration — with some concern about the restrictive approach being taken.

An issue we will be closely looking out for is any move by the federal government to introduce legislation along the lines of the recently introduced United States federal government anti-terrorist legislation. Such legislation has serious implications for civil liberties and freedom of access to information. It also implicates libraries, archives and bookshops in providing access to records and individual's details. Further information can be found at <http://www.ala.org/washoff/terrorism.pdf>.

[The Association's statement *Connecting Australians* was published in the November 2001 issue of *inCite* and is available on our website at http://www.alia.org.au/incite/2001/11/connecting_australians.html]. ■