

Bibliothèques sans Frontières: Melbourne's City Library and the inner capital city public lending libraries of Australia

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The chequered history of inner state capital city public lending libraries in Australia has manifested the state/local government tension, and the unusual scope of the State Libraries, which at various times included a lending role. This led to the neglect of their responsibility for lending libraries by some inner capital city local government authorities, particularly in Adelaide and Melbourne. The Adelaide City Council did not fund its own CBD library until 1991 on the acceptance of that responsibility from the State Library. Following the closure of the Victorian State Library's lending branch, between 1971-2004 central Melbourne had no public lending library until the establishment of the City Library as an unusual partnership between the Melbourne City Council and the Council for Adult Education. The outstanding success of that library demonstrates the correctness of the decision of the Melbourne City Council to finally invest in a central lending library. The return on its modest investment, using quantitative and qualitative measures and for its profile has already been considerable. Because of its very heavy use by residential and nonresidential users, the Library has early encountered the need to improve its hours, staffing and resources. The resolution of this pressing need is the responsibility of the Council if the Library is to achieve its full potential for the residential community, and for the large workforce and visitor community which provides the City with much of its financial and social capital.

This paper is entitled *Bibliothèques sans Frontières* because that is precisely how capital city library investment must be viewed by local government, with breadth, not narrowness. It also serves to emphasise that Australia's 12 million public library users often do not recognise ever changing local government boundaries in their use of them. Nor should they need to.

Someone once observed that water is very nonpolitical. When in flood it does not stop at lines on a map. Like water, library users do not stop at their local government boundaries, even if they know them. Few of those 12 million Australian public library users are much concerned about who provides their public libraries so long as they are well resourced, accessible, and free at the point of use. This is a very good reason for state governments to not resile from that subsidy encouragement of local government to develop and improve their libraries, which has resulted in Australia's public library system — within only the last 30 years — catching up with other developed countries to now rank in the top 10 public library nations.

The State Libraries

Australian capital city public library development must therefore be examined in the context of the late development of public libraries for all Australians. The starting point has to be Australia's public — later retitled — state libraries which because of their multiplicity of functions 'are in some ways a peculiarly Australian phenomena, with no close parallels anywhere in the world'.¹

In addition to being public libraries of reference and research, those state libraries are collecting and documentary heritage institutions. They have sometimes been compared with the national libraries of other countries. The State Library of NSW in particular would have claim to be called the National Library of NSW, as the Victorian Gallery is called the

National Gallery of Victoria. At one stage they were also public lending libraries, something which the State Library of NSW ceased being in 1909 but which in the case of the State Library of Victoria lasted from 1894-1971. This was unquestionably a major factor in the late development of public lending libraries in the metropolitan areas of the capital cities. State and local governments had an excuse to do nothing about providing local libraries accessible to all, apart from sometimes providing meagre subsidies to Mechanics Institute's and School of Arts subscription libraries very long after the UK, USA and New Zealand had decided that free municipal libraries were the way of the future.

The Munn-Pitt report

As a consequence the 1934 Munn-Pitt national library survey was funded by the US Carnegie Corporation at the 1929 initiative of the Library Association of Victoria. Published in Melbourne in 1935, its seminal report — which attracted supportive editorials from every major newspaper in Australia — famously stated

As a whole Australia was better provided with local libraries in 1880 than it is today. Almost every city and large town contains a decadent institute or school of arts, many of which give evidence of having had a former period of usefulness. It is pathetic to observe the pride and complacency with which local committees exhibit wretched little institutes which have long since become 'cemeteries of old and forgotten books'.²

In his long introduction to the Munn-Pitt report the president of the Australian Council for Educational Research, Frank Tate, asserted that

It now remains for those who believe in the necessity for an adequate library system to see to it that the results of the survey are kept prominently before the Australian people.³

In a sense, 70 years after that report, that is what we are doing here this evening. It is salutary to read what Ralph Munn, Director of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and Ernest Pitt, Chief Librarian of the Public Library of Victoria, wrote about public lending library provision in the Australian state capital cities.

Sydney

Sydney is the only one of the five major cities of Australia which maintains a rate supported municipal lending library. It is the result of the transfer in 1909 of the lending department of the public library of NSW to the city of Sydney. The city deserves credit for assuming this responsibility in a country for which municipal support for libraries is still a rarity. The library is poor and small, but in proportion to its resources it is used as much as city libraries abroad, thus indicating that when free library service is provided there is a ready response by the people.⁴

Munn and Pitt also reflected on the complete absence of municipal free libraries in the rest of Greater Sydney and suggested a metropolitan library district financed between the city and other local authorities.

Brisbane

Anyone wishing to carry away a favourable impression of the Public Library of Queensland should never make the mistake of entering it... it is impossible to tell the truth about this library without seeming to exaggerate its deficiencies. Municipal, state and university libraries services are all needed. There is no municipal library of any kind.⁵

Brisbane, the largest local authority in Australia now serving about 900,000 people, was not to achieve a free public library service until 1976, 40 years after Munn and Pitt reported. It

now has one of the most improved services in Australia. Good libraries for all clearly can take considerable persistence and time to achieve.

Adelaide

There is not a free public lending library in all of South Australia...the children's section (of the Public Library) is open only from 2 to 5 pm on Saturdays, Sundays and public and school holidays... Unfortunately books are not lent, and thus much of its potential service is lost. When the city and suburban authorities recognise their obligations by establishing a free lending library in the city, with branches in the suburbs, this children's library should form the nucleus of a collection housed either in the central building or in a suitable branch library.⁶

Subsequently the then Public Library of SA launched the Adelaide Lending Library in 1946, a full children's lending service in 1954 and a youth lending service in 1957. The Adelaide City Council, after singular stalling, did not fund this lending library until 1991 and did not show extended responsibility for CBD lending libraries until 2004, with the provision of three new 'boutique' libraries. With this provision it paralleled the opening of Melbourne City Council's City Library, but in terms of finally accepting its responsibility for funding its CBD library service it was ahead by nearly 15 years.

Perth

This is the only capital city (subscription) institute which is attractive and inviting and in which the books are in pleasing physical condition. As a club library the institute services its 1800 subscribing members well, but it should be remembered that it is nothing more than a reading club. Its membership is less than one per cent of the population. That a free lending library service is needed in Perth is shown by the fact that nonmembers frequently attempt to use the institute's facilities. As soon as conditions permit, Perth should move toward the establishment of rate subscription free library service...⁷

Perth did so in 1957. Indicative of 1930s attitudes in Australia to the concept of public libraries — 80 years after they commenced development in the US and UK, and 50 years after New Zealand — was the following comment by the librarian of the Kalgoorlie Mechanics Institute to Munn and Pitt during their visit to the goldfields of Western Australia. 'We want plenty of love stories for the women and murder yarns for the men'.

'Unmitigated humbug' was his description of the plan of allowing the free use of the library by selected children. He believes that people will not appreciate library service if it is supplied by rates.⁸

There are some, doubtless, of a similar belief still, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Hobart

For a city of the size of Hobart, the library is the poorest in Australia and New Zealand... A survey of the shelves shows how the library has been starved. Their appearance is rendered still worse by the fact that a number of the newer books are kept away from direct public access in order that they may not be worn out. The lending department is incredibly poor... The authorities have been forced to lend books from the reference collection, and the Tasmanian library is the only one which adopts the practice.⁹

Melbourne

And what did Ralph Munn and Ernest Pitt have to say about library provision in Marvellous Melbourne, cultural and arts capital of the nation?

The Public Library of Victoria is the only one of the strictly state libraries which maintains a lending service for the use of residents of the city. This lending branch has a stock of only 67,000 volumes and occupies quarters which are most inconvenient and unattractive. They have been considered 'temporary' since 1908. In spite of these handicaps the Branch loaned 228,000 volumes to city and suburban residents during 1933, 60 per cent of which were books of nonfiction.

During the depression the government proposed that the trustees charged a registration fee of one shilling to each borrower, and that country borrowers be required to pay transport charges both ways, instead of the return charge only. Receipts from both services were to be paid to the state's consolidated revenue. The trustees properly refused to alter their established policy of giving free service. They also pointed out the hardship it would bring to poor borrowers, and the small net revenue which would be realised after all the bookkeeping systems were installed.

Munn and Pitt also recognised that in Greater Melbourne

The libraries of the suburban cities vary greatly, but their average of accomplishment is far above that of the Sydney suburbs. Many of the suburban municipalities have at least recognised the principle of giving financial support from rates.

They calculated that total annual loans from free libraries in Greater Melbourne were only 800,000 compared with several million in each of similar size cities such as Boston, Manchester, Pittsburgh and Liverpool, and concluded that

The solution of Melbourne's library problem is dependent upon the formation of a library district, similar in its government to the Metropolitan Board of Works, which will bring the entire area under one authority which will have the power to strike a uniform rate.

The political difficulties of doing this were believed to be surmountable 'but if either side finally determines not to cooperate, the metropolitan district should establish its lending library separately as has been done in Sydney'.¹⁰ Munn and Pitt's idea of one library authority for the whole of the metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne never came to pass. Interestingly, however, the regional library corporations which are such a distinctive feature of the Victorian public library scene, are a smaller manifestation of the same concept. The Melbourne City Council is thus the only capital city council in Australia which runs its library service in cooperation with another council. However neither of those councils is yet funding the Yarra-Melbourne Regional Library particularly well, Melbourne with somewhat less than 3.5% of rates even less relatively than Yarra with about 3.8% of its rates.

In their major recommendations about capital city library services, Munn and Pitt did not recommend the separate Sydney model, but rather the Hobart model of state and municipal cooperation in a single building, although they were very critical of the then neglected condition of the Hobart Library which was attributed 'entirely to local indifference'. They considered that such a cooperative model would minimise duplication and be more cost effective. Hobart still operates with that model, the outcome of which remains a collocated central reference and lending library, as is the case in most British and New Zealand cities.

The McColvin report

Just over a decade after the Munn-Pitt report, another major national report was published in Melbourne as *Public libraries in Australia: present conditions and future possibilities*.¹¹ Its author was Lionel McColvin, City Librarian of Westminster in the UK and the leading British public librarian of his time. Arranged by the Australian Council for Educational Research and funded largely by the British Council, his survey was clearly intended as a follow up to the Munn-Pitt report. He was unimpressed with actual progress, apart from the passing by most

states of enabling legislation for the development of local public libraries as a partnership between local and state governments.

He confirmed the commonsense of one library service for the whole of a metropolitan area but recognised that, except in Brisbane and to a degree Hobart, this was undermined by the proliferation of small local authorities and state government reluctance to have their role and authority potentially challenged by the consolidation of all local authorities into one very large metropolitan authority.

The consequence, McColvin saw, was

The effect upon central lending library provision is undoubtedly unfortunate, since in only two instances have the central city authorities accepted any real responsibility at all.¹²

One of those authorities was the City of Sydney which McColvin noted ‘as is usual in Great Britain encouraged nonresident employees in the City to use the library’. The other was Hobart, which was making ‘a substantial contribution to a state administered public library service’.

In Adelaide the Public Library had recently opened a generally available lending library and was lending books from its general stock but ‘the city council does nothing’. In Perth there was no free public library at all, and similarly its ‘city council does nothing’.

As for Melbourne

The city council does virtually nothing to provide libraries, beyond making a meagre contribution to two poor subscription libraries. A central lending library – good within its limitations but not the central lending library a city of this importance should have – is provided by the State Public Library of Victoria.

McColvin was unimpressed by this neglect, and the lack of leadership to suburban councils by the Melbourne City Council

This abstention on the part of the central city authorities is doubly unfortunate. On the one hand it denies the residents and workers access to essential services; on the other hand, it sets a bad example to other authorities, particularly their near neighbours who could be forgiven if they asked why they should shoulder burdens that their probably wealthier and more ‘important’ counterparts are evading. Much to their credit some of them, in Melbourne, have *not* asked that question – or, if they have, they have not been deterred.¹³

In the case of Melbourne, public library leadership was thus coming from the suburban local councils, not from the most influential and the wealthiest council in Victoria — the reverse of what should have been occurring. Worse, alas, was to come.

The Jungwirth report

The catalyst for the worsening was the 1963 review of Victoria’s library situation by Sir John Jungwirth, formerly permanent head of the Premier’s Department. It was a review borne out of serious public and professional discontent with the State Library and the Free Library Service Board. In relation to the State Library’s lending branch Jungwirth concluded that inadequate bookstock, outmoded work routines and lack of modern equipment, made for poor service. As a consequence those municipal libraries in the suburbs and elsewhere held it in low regard and reported that they received better interlibrary loan service from the Public Library of SA.

In recommending the closure of the branch it was considered that

If the Lending Branch is to carry out its present functions efficiently, much additional expenditure will have to be incurred. Such expenditure is not warranted in view of the duplication of lending services between the Lending Branch and municipal free libraries.¹⁴

This, it was concluded, would have implications for the City of Melbourne, and specifically the Melbourne City Council.

Having in mind the position the City of Melbourne holds among the cities of the world in the fields of art and culture, it is difficult to understand why the City Council has been content with the minor library service in operation.

The City Council at present operates excellent adult and children's libraries at both North Melbourne and East Melbourne, and a children's library at Carlton. It does not have a library functioning in the central City area and, apparently, has no concrete plans to provide such a service. In this respect it compares poorly with the City of Sydney, and smaller cities such as Perth and Brisbane, in Australia and Auckland and Wellington in New Zealand.

In Auckland there is a central municipal library and 10 excellent branches to serve a population of 146,000 and in Wellington a central library with nine branches to serve a population of 124,000.

The fact that the State Library Lending Section is situated in the City area has tended to inhibit any proposals to the City Council to provide a lending service in the heart of the City.

In the section of this Report dealing with the State Library, I have recommended that the Metropolitan Lending Service be discontinued. *This will make it imperative for the Melbourne City Council to fulfil its responsibilities as a library authority by establishing a central lending library.*¹⁵

Yet despite the seven year's notice, what, when the State Library's lending branch closed in 1971, had happened? Nothing, despite a view at the time that the closure would surely finally make the City Fathers wake up to the fact that not only was their city the only large one in Australia and New Zealand with no CBD lending library, it was probably the only large city in the developed world so lacking.

And so, for another 33 years, until 31 May 2004 with the opening of the City Library, that dubious distinction for the City of Melbourne continued.

It is therefore absolutely commendable that the current City Council, with its City Library, has implemented what its predecessors, by sin of commission or omission, did not for so long. It is a fine library, achieved inexpensively by the Council due to the unusual contributions of the State Government and the CAE.

The Melbourne City Council: its challenge

Public lending libraries in the mainland states of Australia, in New Zealand and in most other parts of the developed world are established ultimately at the discretion of the local government authority. In few cases are they required of them by legislation. Two exceptions are the UK and Tasmania. In the UK not only are public libraries mandatory for local government — as was considered but rejected for Victoria by Jungwirth — they are also audited by the national government.

Therefore a local lending library once established remains, for its ongoing support and development, unequivocally the responsibility of the local government, not of the state government, and not of the national government — much as we might wish both of those

levels of government to provide greater support to improve the Australian public library system. In fact, if a council is brave enough to close its library service, it can do so. All it would directly lose is, in the case of Victoria, a limited amount of state government subsidy. However, such is the valuation that people place on their libraries, that brave council would also likely lose most of its current elected members at the next council election, from the mayor down.

There is thus really no enduring alternative to the Melbourne City Council accepting in full its responsibility for the Library in the same way as other mainland capital city local authorities, with one minor exception, now do for their libraries. The long held — on questionable grounds of precedent — prospect of substantial ongoing funding of it by the State Government is still elusive, and likely to remain so. It should *not* be used to delay the resolution, by the City Council, of the pressing needs of the City Library.

Nonresidential use of the City Library

The case for ongoing State Government funding of the City Library has been based on the heavy use made of it by workers, students, shoppers and other short and longer term visitors who are not residents within the City of Melbourne. At first sight this case has plausibility, and simple appeal.

However, on the issue of the inevitable heavy use of inner capital city libraries by those nonresidents who work in the City, or visit it, there are two possible viewpoints.

One is that those users are imposing a significant cost on the City Library, and thus on the business and residential ratepayers of the City, and that therefore some of that cost should not be paid by the Council, but by the State Government from the general taxation revenue to which all Victorians and others have contributed in some way. Nonresidential use of the mainland capital city libraries measured in loans ranges from 81% in Perth, to 63% in Melbourne, to 36% in Sydney. If state governments were persuaded of the case for funding directly the inner capital city libraries, which generally they are not, logically the Victorian government should be contributing a high proportion of the annual costs of the City Library.

There is another perspective, however. It is one which tends to be overlooked by the proponents of state government funding. It is likely a perspective not lost on state government treasuries, and of which capital city councils themselves are well aware from their research. It is the wider view that capital city councils are relatively wealthy precisely because they have the advantage of attracting so many workers and visitors to them. They market themselves and provide inducements to maintain that advantage. Without nonresidential workers and visitors, inner city capital businesses, and therefore a council's rates and other income base would decline very significantly. This would probably require rate increases of its residents and its remaining businesses, making those businesses even less viable.

The regional shopping centres, which increasingly around the world incorporate public libraries within them in recognition that they are a retailing draw, would be delighted if this happened.

It is those very workers, shoppers and daily and other visitors to the City of Melbourne who provide its retailers, eating places, hoteliers and other businesses with much of their turnover, and most of its employers with their staff. Indirectly they also provide the Melbourne City Council with much of its wealth. They contribute to council rates in the same indirect way

that rent paying residents of the City do, but in many little bits, and in supporting businesses which do pay large amounts of rates. Those who provide the City with so much of its income, activity and life surely deserve access to a decent, well marketed, well funded and well staffed lending library operating seven days a week and the use of which is actively and proudly encouraged by the Council.

The only case for the Melbourne City Council not providing its City Library with the necessary funds to be that kind of library, is if it were contributing already a high percentage of rates to it and which could be measured as due to nonresidential use. At about a lowly 3.5% rates contribution to the Yarra-Melbourne Regional Library Corporation including the City Library, compared with the 11.7% of Christchurch, the 6% of Wellington, a common percentage in Australia of 5-6%, and even the 4.5% of the City of Perth, there is a way to go before such a case can be pleaded.

It was always improbable that a nonprofit educational agency like the CAE, financially challenged as most such public good educational providers are, would ever be able to contribute more than a modest percentage to the running costs of the City Library — nor, now, should it be expected to. The CAE does, of course, attract many people into the City, who will spend while they are in it — another benefit to the City. And indirectly it does bring some money to the City Library from the State Government as the Government commendably does continue to subsidise the CAE.

On the assumption that c\$650,000pa would address the need for more staff, better hours, and eliminated or reduced petty charges, this additional funding would bring the Melbourne City Council's rates investment in its libraries to a still modest 4%.

The Council may, of course, not have the funding flexibility or reserves to contribute that amount from the beginning of 2006. If it can demonstrate this to the satisfaction of the State Treasury there may be a sustainable argument, depending on past formal and informal undertakings and understandings, for the Victorian government to contribute short term to the additional costs of the City Library, beyond its \$2million contribution to its establishment costs (nowhere else does a state government appear to have contributed such an amount to a council's inner city library). If it did so during the next three years of the Library's development as the Melbourne City Council progressively increases its funding, this would also be entirely commendable and helpful in resolving any impasse in addressing the Library's pressing funding, staffing and hours of opening needs.

The above suggestion is made to resolve a possible short term difficulty for the Council. However it is made in the context that in none of the other mainland states is the state government committed to contributing to ongoing funding of capital city lending libraries beyond the normal subsidy to all public libraries. The South Australian government for 2005/6 is contributing about 12 per cent of the recurrent costs of the Adelaide City Libraries as its new libraries develop, but only on a year by year basis. This funding comes from the overall state subsidy for public libraries, at the disputed expense of other councils. It is thus at risk, and represents an annual concern for the Libraries' management.

Given the significant revenue which large numbers of workers and visitors bring indirectly to CBD councils, the case is not strong for them to receive preferential library subsidy treatment on a long term basis. This would be unless, again, a council is spending an unusually high percentage of rates to maintain its library because of very high operating costs which can be demonstrably attributed to nonresidential use of it.

The Victorian State Government: its challenge

Although the responsibility for the funding and condition of public libraries is unquestionably that of the local council, those councils are supported in library provision by state governments.

Several state governments in Australia are providing overall public library subsidy at declining relative levels, excusing themselves with the sophistry that the decline of subsidy levels against increasing local government expenditure is because councils have found their libraries so valued that they have voluntarily increased that funding. Particularly New South Wales and Victoria are subsidising public libraries as though they are the comparatively simple book lending agencies of 50 years ago. Yet as the 2005 UK *Libraries impact study* by PriceWaterhouseCooper found ‘book borrowing indicators should not be used as the prime measure of how libraries contribute to local and national priorities’.¹⁷

Victoria now only contributes about 14 per cent of the cost of the state’s public libraries, about 0.1 per cent of annual state government expenditure, the second worst in Australia after NSW. This sets a poor lead for local government. It is not much for what is also the state’s most heavily used and valued community service, and which is making a major contribution to the Victorian government’s policy framework of *Growing Victoria together*, in which the main driver is nurturing resilient, active and confident communities. There is a growing and justified concern in local government and among lay and professional library supporters in several states with the relative level of state government support now provided for public libraries.

Libraries building communities

Although the Victorian state government needs to rethink its subsidy quantum to the state’s public library system before the next election, it has undertaken useful programs in support of that system, such as the major funding of new mobile libraries and replacement buildings, particularly in rural areas. Most recently it has supported a large and world standard research study published in 2005 which is the first comprehensive Australian study — involving 10,000 people — of the value that public libraries add to their communities and individual quality of life.

*Libraries building communities(LBC)*¹⁸ concludes that Victoria’s public library system is indeed a major community asset and strength but also that public libraries, for funding, buildings, staffing and other reasons may not be able to realise their full and unique potential to build and strengthen their communities. Every mayor, councillor, CEO, Friends of Libraries group, and public library manager should therefore read at least its executive summary.

The new City Library has exemplified in a short time why so many Victorians think their libraries are very important, whether they use them regularly or not, and why libraries produce such a great return on investment. Apart from the community building return, this return was identified by participants in the LBC study as, for users of larger libraries like the City Library

- \$500 plus per year for light users
- \$4,000 per year for heavy users

- \$7,000-\$10,000 per year for frequent users of a range of resources¹⁹

This would mean that if all 24,000 members of the City Library are only light users of it, which many are not, the Library is adding value to users and the community of at least \$12million per year. This far exceeds the annual expenditure on the City Library, providing a conservative return on investment (ROI) of over \$4 for every dollar invested in it. This correlates with other library ROI findings, including recent research in Florida and South Carolina which shows returns of \$6.54 for every dollar invested in them in Florida,²⁰ and \$4.48 in South Carolina.²¹ It is doubtful if any other Melbourne City Council community investment produces a greater demonstrable return.

The City Library: its challenge

The figures about the City Library speak for themselves. With 456,000 visits July 2004–June 2005 it is probably in the top five most visited public buildings in Melbourne. It has annual loans of over 700,000, 24,000 members, 33,485 loans per staff member compared with state average of 31,314, and 30 loans per reader against the state average of 18. As another measure of its staff workload, its 700,000 loans represent 1.4million loan transactions. This is emphasised because the work of handling items returned to a library exceeds that of lending them. Those transactions are growing at about 30% per month, as are the number of its visitors.

It is already possibly the busiest library in the Victorian public library system, and one of the busiest in Australia, all provided on what appears to be a lean staffing base. Architecturally and operationally the Library is also a place of innovation and distinctive design using a unique model for extending the boundaries of library service. It is truly the *Learning & Living Room of the City* — a library in which at long last Melbourne, and the Melbourne City Council and CAE, can take considerable pride. The biggest threat to it, as with all libraries, is complacency that the needs of all of its users, the wide benefits it provides, and the staff workload, are fully understood and accepted by those who control the public purse strings.

If not a direct threat at this stage, another very time consuming issue for the Library's partners, its manager, and particularly the Yarra-Melbourne Regional Library, must be the complex governance of it. Governance issues have sometimes undermined joint use libraries and played a role in their dissolution. Simplification of the City Library's governance would be beneficial to all.

Barriers to greater library use

For what they provide to communities and individuals, public libraries can never be overused — something which can be said of few institutions or services in society. They can, however, be underused and made difficult to use by barriers such as difficult and unsignposted locations, poor hours, petty charges and difficult access to resources, including physical barriers such as shelves which are too high, too low, and too close together.

There are already manifestations of this in the poor signposting of the City Library in the CBD, and lack of publicity about it in shops and hotels etc. It is a marker of how much people value a library that they actually find their way to it. Its hours are limited for the CBD environment in which it operates. The problem is not that its total hours of opening are poor. At 61 hours per week they are not greatly behind Penrith Library in NSW which has the longest hours in Australia at 70 hours per week. It is commendable that the Library opens at

8am weekdays, although 10am on Saturday is too late. The real issue is that it is a waste of investment to have such a fine facility locked up for 107 of the 168 hours in a week, particularly on Saturday afternoon and Sunday. The Library should also be open on select public holidays. Another manifestation is the introduction of, and increase to, petty fees for some of the City Library's services. These, as the Trustees of the Public Library of Victoria observed as far back as 1934, are likely if properly costed, to cost more to administer than any real revenue return. Such petty charges tend to be introduced in libraries without through evaluation of all of the consequences or proper costing of their administration. They also tend to be insidious, and once in place difficult to persuade funders, and sometimes library managers, that they are usually not worth their true net return. Examples at the City Library are

- *Fines for 'overdue' items* This is despite the fact that there is no validated evidence that fining is more effective than any other mechanism used to encourage borrowers to return items by the date a library has arbitrarily set for their return. However there is evidence that accumulated fines may discourage the borrower from ever returning an item; of parents stopping their children from using a library because of fines incurred by them; and of pensioners and others in strained circumstances not being able to pay them. There is also evidence of affluent borrowers being willing to pay overdue fines to retain an item the return of which has been requested for another user. Fines discomfort staff, increase security risks for them, and do little for the otherwise positive image of libraries. Increasingly libraries are not fining if they can persuade their councils of its ineffectiveness and substantial negatives. Instead they are using their library management systems, emailing and text messaging to users to minimise the staff costs of reminding users to renew online or in person, or return items borrowed.
- *Interlibrary loan charges* No library is self sufficient. A strength of libraries and librarians is that perhaps more than any other agency and profession they cooperate in borrowing from each other to meet the needs of users. Sometimes this is freely and reciprocally provided, as normally between public libraries. Sometimes a university library may charge a standard rate to lend one of its items to a public library. There is an automatic tendency to thoughtlessly pass this on to the user, but why? Basically an interlibrary loan is for a book a library does not have, either because it was intentionally not purchased or the library did not know to buy it. The library therefore does not have the book, and it has saved a considerable amount of money by not buying, processing and shelving it. So why should the user, who just wants the book, pay the price of the library's own selection decision or collection failure? Again, this is discriminatory and favours the affluent against those who are less so. Most public libraries do pass on all or part of interlibrary loan charges, but only because they lack the small amount of additional funding to be able to provide a free, nondiscriminatory service the demand for which is rarely consistently heavy.
- *Reservation charges* The same principle applies here as with interlibrary loans, but the thinking about why any charge is made is even more confused. It is not the fault of the user that the item they would like is not available in enough copies for a copy to be on the shelf when they visit the library in person or electronically. The library has, however, saved considerable money by not purchasing enough copies to satisfy immediate demand. So is the reservation charge simply a rationing device to inhibit an individual from making too many reservations? Is it to help ensure that the reserved item is actually collected? Is it to cover part or all of the cost of notification that the reserved item has

arrived? Is it to try to generate revenue, tokenistic or otherwise? The reality is that some libraries have a reservation charge, others do not. They are difficult to justify in the context of what libraries should be about — ensuring that they are used as much by as many people, of all circumstances, as possible.

- *Internet and email charges* If a Victorian goes to a public library in South Australia they will not be charged to use the internet and email in any of them. Public libraries, in recognition of their role in minimising the digital divide in society, and as a condition of SA state government subsidy, are not permitted to charge for either. If that Victorian then flies to the UK, again they will not be charged for using the internet or email in public libraries. This is a condition of the Blair government's \$250million *People's network* investment in information technology and staff training in public libraries, again to help address the 'digital divide'. Many other Australian libraries, apart from those in South Australia, do not charge for internet or email use, so why is Melbourne's City Library needing to start charging for email use? To ration that use? To generate token revenue? Or to be consistent with practice elsewhere? One reason sometimes given for public libraries charging for internet and email use is unfair competition with local internet cafés. If applied as a principle it would mean the end of free at the point of use public libraries to avoid unfair competition for bookshops, subscription libraries and video stores. In practice, all of these agencies tend to complement each other. If an internet café falters or goes out of business, as they frequently do, it will be the quality of its coffee which will be its deathnell, not limited free internet and email access in a public library.

The point in raising the above examples is that they are practices which are discriminatory in some way, and which may well produce no or little revenue over the true cost of administering them. They may work as a blunt instrument to equalise or ration access and use. However there are more subtle and friendly means which can be used, for example, to counsel the enthusiastic user who regularly reserves several items at a time and rarely collects them.

Those charges can also spoil the library experience and deter and irritate considerably users and prospective users who fairly consider they have already paid, through all of their taxes, for their library service — a service which in the 21st century consists of much more than the capacity to borrow a limited number of whatever books a user finds on the shelves of a library.

In the case of the City Library they are something of a blight on its otherwise outstanding performance and user acceptance. Their rationale, advantages and disadvantages, and true net revenue should be given thorough and objective examination, and alternatives trialled where appropriate.

Reconceptualising the investment

The many Victorian participants in the *Libraries building communities* study emphasised the need to reconceptualise the funding of Victoria's public libraries for them to achieve their full potential to build educated, literate, informed, recreated and connected communities.

In similar vein the realisation of the full potential of Melbourne's City Library will not occur without a reconceptualisation of the relationship between its partners, and improved investment in it by its major partner.

Failing that, one of the City of Melbourne's greatest assets may become a political imbroglio. The avoidance of that imbroglio needs swift and decisive leadership to ensure that the dismal saga of inner Melbourne's library past does not recur in the 21st century.

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