

SEX, LIES AND POLITICS: PUBLIC LIBRARY FUNDING FUTURES

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Investment in public libraries is increasing worldwide because of recognition that they make a real difference to people, to their learning, knowledge, life quality and to connected communities. There is now a large qualitative and quantitative evidence base of their very high return on that investment. Yet Australia continues to fund its public libraries at only 8c per Australian per day. Mainland state governments, specially NSW and Queensland, have increasingly failed to match local government funding and they have not been held to account. Australia does not have a national public library strategic framework to focus connected federal, state and local government effort and funding towards better, more accessible, public libraries. It is time it did. In 2008 the Australian government should be requested to lead the state/territories and local government in developing such a framework, in the interests of all in Australia and particularly the 60 per cent of people of all ages, backgrounds and circumstances who use, depend on, and value public libraries. If it does not do so, a coalition of library associations should assume the initiative and convene a national summit on public libraries. Invitees to this summit should include senior representatives of all levels of government in Australia.

Throughout the Great South Land is a Great Good Place. That Great Good Place is the resort of many, from their cradle to their grave. To it all are welcome, without barrier of circumstance, wealth, health, disability and language. It is for all the people, all the time.

That Great Good Place has been described in more ways than any other.*

*windows to the world
umbrella institutions of the learning society
neighbourhoods of knowledge
community anchors
the new village green
cornerstones of democracy
key institutions of civil society
streetcorner universities
literacy enablers
hallmarks of an educated and civilised society
discovery places*

How is it then, that this unique and ubiquitous, much used and much loved, Great Good Place is so underfunded to be the best that it can be?

A time of opportunity for public libraries

The essence of the following paper is that the 1600 public libraries in wealthy Australia are being starved of their developmental potential, and that public libraries and their advocates need to raise their voices in unison and assert this to national, state and local governments – and the nation at large. There may never be a better political, economic and educational context and time in which to do so.

However, we need be realistic – but not daunted – about the challenges. The first of those challenges is sex, or more prosaically gender and status, in the valuation of public libraries as a priority – not a soft option – at all levels of government.

* for a list of over 160 descriptors of public libraries see the Friends of Libraries Australia website www.fola.org.au

The gender and status issue

In *Libraries in Australia*¹ Biskup identifies gender and status as one of seven issues which have long continued to exercise the attention of the profession. It is an issue which continues to affect the perception, valuation and funding of public libraries, at least as much as it still affects areas such as primary school education, child care, nursing and the other caring and serving professions.

As stated pointedly a few years ago by a country public librarian

Our council is run by old men who generally don't use the library themselves and whose thinking doesn't extend much beyond roads and rubbish. They never seem to have problems in finding large amounts for a new grader but ask them for a small amount to benefit the whole community through the library, if it is given at all it will be with a patronising comment 'you've done very well this year but don't expect any more next year'. They just don't seem to realise what a community uproar there would be if the library closed, or that it's the most heavily used council service they provide.

Although local government in Australia is gradually moving on from that position, doubtless that librarian's assertion will resonate with at least some of you at this conference.

However the gender and age of local and state government decision makers may not be the only negative personal factors in the funding of public libraries. As Harold Perkin, in his 1989 *magnum opus* on the rise of professional society observed, it is the tension between public and private sector professionals which is manifested in the struggle for society's resources, a struggle

...between those who benefit directly from government expenditure and those who see themselves as the source of that expenditure...the struggle between the public and private sector professions is the master conflict of professional society.²

Many elected local councillors, politicians and members of government boards are, in one guise or another, private professionals with possibly little empathy with the people and community service passion and commitment of public sector professionals such as librarians and teachers. In a 1988 conference on the issues, Ida Vincent lent weight to this viewpoint. She noted that female librarians had a dubious professional status and a negative popular image, but considered that there could be alternative explanations for the status of librarianship. This included its largely public funding and administration as a service, both attributes which tend to result in low status and the relatively low value which the community places on its product.³

The feminisation of librarianship

It is worth a backward glance at gender and status issues in librarianship, to remind ourselves of how much has changed, and how much they remain as issues to be recognised and approached strategically in the quest for better public library funding. This is in the context that in Australia in 2005, 89% of employed librarians and 97% of library technicians were female; that library assistants are mainly female; and that a majority of public library users are children and women.

Librarianship *is* one of the most feminised professions, but it was not always so. Women did not start to participate in the library workforce until the 1880s. This was not with universal approbation from the profession, members of which forecast that it would result in the lowering of its status and resourcing. However the male chief librarians of the late 19th century recognised that the large numbers of educated and underutilized women could be put to good and low cost use as public libraries developed. One of those US librarians, a Frederick Perkins wrote in a paper 'How to make town libraries successful'⁴ that a good way to keep costs down was to hire women as librarians and assistants, but that special precautions would have to be taken to prevent the 'curious troubles' which occurred when woman worked together.

In Australia Henry Charles Lennox (HCL) Anderson of the then Public library of NSW was the first state librarian to employ women, although as Biskup observes

...his initial reasons for doing so would have probably failed to endear him to latter-day feminists: he believed that the 'kind of girls' he could get for the salary normally attached to subordinate positions was better than the 'class of boys that can normally be got'.⁵

Even more wrath incurring might have been the following assertion in *The Bulletin* 1 March 1917

For various reasons, the elderly fathers of the Melbourne Public Library do not employ women except to scrub floors. There are a good many jobs at the library...Much of the work consists in sitting down and waiting for somebody to turn up and ask for something; and a woman could almost do that. The time seems right to give her a chance. In neither war nor peace can we any longer afford to waste men in unproductive jobs. If the new arrivals at the library are nice things in clean pinnies, so much the better...

As recently as 1972 sociologist Sol Encel did provoke the profession when he concluded in his survey of Australian librarians, that because future libraries would be information centres relying on computers and mechanised systems

...the women of tomorrow will also have less opportunity than men to develop the skills needed for running tomorrow's library...because they are less able to meet the formal prerequisites of such training – a proven level of competence in mathematics.⁶

Men matter

At the 1992 ALIA conference in Albury, Gabrielle Baldwin's paper 'Reading women: gender roles in libraries' suggested that it was the altruistic urge to contribute to the personal growth of individuals which made librarianship attractive to women; the role of the caring and serving professions needed to be asserted; men should be encouraged to break out of 'those oppressive definitions of masculinity which have barred many of them from what has been labeled female territory'; and that

...if we value the traditional female areas then attempts to open career prospects for women must be balanced by an equal attempt to open those areas to men, because to fail to do so is to signal that they do not matter.⁷

And of course, for public library funding futures and other very good reasons those areas and men do matter. This is not, however, much evident in public library and library school recruitment, or in their considerations of library workforce and succession planning. Like primary education in particular, more men are needed in libraries, but there is scant encouragement for them to consider what in reality is a dynamic and fascinating profession at the centre of the knowledge society and its needs. Public libraries also need to play their part, as some are already doing, in connecting with boys, young males and men *as a priority* in their strategic planning, marketing and programs This is especially given what we know about the alienation of them from formal school education, and their too frequent reading and educational underachievement.

As Sir Michael Caine once observed

I educated myself in the library, which means I found out for myself what I wanted to know. School taught me what I didn't know and what I should find out when I left school. School should really teach you how ignorant you are and what you want to find out.

A UK report relevant to a challenge often not well met by Australian public libraries or recognised by their funders is engaging young people. *Fulfilling their potential: a national development programme for young people's library services*⁸ concludes that public libraries can improve the life quality and socialisation of all young people, particularly those who are risk. The premise is that a child engaging with society from a young age is more likely to engage with society as an adult, and that a modern and welcoming public library is one of the best investments which society can make towards this end.

American YA authority Patrick Jones made substantiating points in his paper 'Connecting young adults and libraries in the 21st century' given at the *Learning futures* conference in Adelaide in March 2007, and published in the conference proceedings and *Australasian public libraries and information services*.⁹

The young people interviewed for *Fulfilling their potential* had strong views about the image of public libraries, including that they should have 'more men, young people and friendly staff who move around helping people, not sitting behind counters'. They also wanted 'involvement in the design of their libraries and services'.

The best libraries in Australia, as in the UK and elsewhere, are already responding to that need to engage with young people, and males in particular. One special initiative in Queensland has been the *verbYL*, Yeppoon's unique youth lounge and library.¹⁰

However many libraries are not really connecting with boys and young males. Because of their poor locations, unattractive buildings, staffing, technology and funding they often cannot. Yet the people who ultimately make the decisions about those library locations, buildings, staffing and funding are still often older males. This is the very population cohort which makes the least direct use of public libraries and of which, due to the late development of public libraries in many parts of Australia such as Queensland, only about 1 in 5 had access to in their formative childhood years. It is little wonder, then, that achieving decent funding for public libraries has proven to be such a challenge, despite all of the evidence of their very high usage, support and return on investment.

Other factors

There are other factors which public libraries need to recognise in the quest for funding, and do something about if they can. These include that

- the expectations of people about their libraries are often too low. This may be because of unawareness of what they should provide and what is provided in libraries elsewhere. Public libraries need to work at *increasing* the expectations of, and demand on, them.
- few people know how cheap their public libraries are, and how their funding is determined and provided. They need to know.¹¹
- it can be difficult to persuade library users, a majority of whom are female, to ask for more and to complain about poor hours, services, buildings, facilities and resources. Anecdotally this is sometimes for fear that complaining may be seen as a reflection on the 'lovely library ladies who bend over backwards to meet their needs, or that their council may react by reducing, rather than increasing library funding. Again, they need to know that access to a good public library service in the 21st century is their right, not privilege.
- public library users are more than 'customers' of the library. They are its *owners*. Treat them as such to build up their sense of ownership.
- few public libraries and councils work convincingly at encouraging feedback and criticism from those community owners. Even simple inexpensive devices such as suggestion boards and forms are lacking in many public libraries, and on their websites.
- few councils have a library committee, or one with community representation on it.
- public librarians may have a poverty mentality, or worse a hairshirt mentality which gets satisfaction from living on little. Such a mentality always leads to more poverty. Library staff may tend to be their own worst enemy by going that much further to help those who need help, regardless of whether it is politically astute to do so. The notion is that the helped user will leave the library happy, spread the good word, and funders will take positive note of their happiness. However, as an American female public librarian pointed out on a list in 2006

You must make it clear that quality service comes from quality funding. If you are always willing to do more for less, you unwittingly train funders that it's OK to give you less.

The importance of partnerships

Partnerships are increasingly important for public library recognition and effectiveness.

In considering why it is worth the time investment to initiate and foster a Friends of the Library group, if you are tired of advocating the library funding cause alone consider the legal axiom that 'he or she who pleads their own cause has a fool for a lawyer'. In other words, public sector professionals seeking funding can all too easily be dismissed by funders as 'professional bleaters', doing so largely for their own benefit. No other profession has potentially such a large community support base as public librarians. It is a base which is currently greatly underutilised.

As Vigdor Schreiberman stated

Libraries serve democracy not the pursuit of wealth. The constituency for democracy is the People who have the fundamental constitutional right to exercise exclusive control over the election of our government. That is where the power of libraries also lies if they are wise enough to marshal that unique resource.¹²

Yet many public libraries still do not have Friends of Libraries groups to support and advocate for them, and to be the library voice of their community. Those who increasingly do have Friends groups need to ensure that they inform them well about public library issues and funding. Effective advocacy requires good information.

Those libraries in Queensland which have wise enough to do so include Caboolture, Gympie, Mackay, Toowoomba, Bundaberg, Cairns, Hervey Bay, Pine Rivers, and of course Ipswich. Why not your library? If you need help in getting a group started the FOLA *Friends of Libraries resource book* and its website www.fola.org.au are useful resources.

For their funding futures, all public libraries need to think strategically about their partnerships within their councils, and within the communities which elect and fund those councils. That needs persuasively persistent library leaders, female and male, who question everything funders tell them and will not take no for an answer. They also need a keen ear and eye for the political spin endemic in governments at all levels.

Lies, damned lies and statistics

Benjamin Disraeli, the 19th century British prime minister, had a female boss – Queen Victoria. He had a great talent for flattering her, once commenting to Matthew Arnold that 'Everyone likes flattery; and when you come to Royalty you should lay it on with a trowel.' As a novelist himself, who once observed that 'When I want to read a novel I write one', he even referred in his conversations with the Queen on literary subjects to 'We authors, Ma'am'.

However his most enduring aphorism is that 'There are lies, damned lies, and statistics'. Public libraries and their associations have not usually been very systematic in searching out and exposing the lies, the damned lies, and the statistics of public library funding. Nor has effective use been made of the data that is available. That has to change if all levels of government are to be held accountable for the lack of overall investment in Australia's public library system.

Local government and the rates debate

Public libraries are by far local government's most heavily used and valued community service, typically by about 60% of the community of all ages. No other council service has such a wide reach within the community, although it still seems to surprise councils in their satisfaction surveys how highly their libraries, good or mediocre, are regarded.

Yet few councils in Australia seem to contribute much more than 6% of rates revenue to them. The average for Queensland councils has been suggested as only about 4%, and may well be considerably

less in rural areas. The annual collection of public library data in Queensland has been inconsistent over time, and appears to be extremely time consuming and demanding of libraries. The real value of much of the data, and the use to which it can be put, is questionable. Moreover it does not include the critical rate percentage statistic, and it is likely that at least some public library managers do not know what percentage of rates revenue their library service receives, how it is tracking, and what the basis for it is. They should.

Although the suggestion would not be received too well by local government in Australia, there is a strong case that the target percentage of rates revenue for their libraries should be at least 10%. This is the percentage that Christchurch City Libraries in New Zealand, possibly the best service in Australasia, now receives. Already there are councils in Australia which allocate between 6% and 8%, although it is difficult to know how many as there is no national record of this statistic. If the 10% target were progressively reached in Queensland, the budget of most library services would at least double.

Has your library service ever dared do the sums and systematically put the case for such a target and the great return on investment it would provide the council and the community? The answer is almost certainly no. But unless public libraries become more focused and assertive in their funding aspirations, they will surely not receive.

Local government amalgamation: a public library opportunity

Bigger councils and regional library corporations usually have better overall library strategies, planning and services than small individual councils. The local government amalgamations in Queensland from 2008 thus provide an opportunity for QPLA to assert that better library service as a priority investment by the new councils will pay off, and mitigate the discontent that every local government amalgamation brings with it.

Good public libraries are the very visible shop windows of proactive, progressive and community focused councils used – let it be emphasised again – by a very large part of any community. They can be an early marker of a beneficial council merger. For areas which experience the closure of local council offices, there is now experience to show the cost effectiveness and community appreciation of attractive redeveloped or new LibraryPlus public libraries which incorporate council customer service centres, tourism information and other community services.¹³ The experience is also that a LibraryPlus brings new awareness of, and members to, the library.

Statistics, spin and sophistry

An issue to test public library funding futures in Australia is the political spin and sophistry used to obfuscate their funding realities.

This is most prevalent at the state/territory government level, as most attempt to hide their retreat over the last 20 years or so from a genuine funding partnership with local government in developing better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia. The most culpable has been NSW, where the state government contribution to public library funding is now less than 7% – an inexcusable disgrace.

Queensland, however, is not far behind, having steadily declined from 24% in 1998/9 to 16% in 2003/4, to what appears to be about 14% in 2006/7. This is a very long way from the 50/50 partnership needed to enable public libraries to achieve anything like their full potential; encourage local government to continue to sustain and increase their investment in them; and to ensure that know nothing members of councils do not start suggesting that direct user pays by annual subscriptions would be a smart alternative to accepting very low state government grants.

The *relative* level at which a state government supports its public libraries is thus important not only fiscally but also symbolically. A progressive lowering of that relative level says ‘We don’t really care what quality and equity of access people in our State have to public libraries’.

When challenged about the relative decline in their funding of public libraries, the states and territories will almost invariably point to the dollars not having decreased, and that the change in relativities is because local government has *chosen* to invest more heavily in the libraries. This is sophistry.

State governments, if they are to retain any credibility, need to support public libraries for all people in their states based on their demonstrable return on investment and potential for all people *in the 21st century*. They are not funding the limited book lending agencies of the 1950s. This is something that the State Government of Queensland needs to get smarter about. That challenge is not addressed by the spin and half truths to be found in the Arts Minister's media release in October 2006 headed 'Increased funding for Queensland's public libraries'. This stated that 'Queensland's public libraries will share in a record \$19.1 million to provide new books and library service across the state'; that 'the government had increased funds for the Library Board of Qld's public library grants by more than \$390,000 for 2006/7'; that 'with these grants our government, in *partnership* with local governments, will provide more services for library users'; and that 'The majority of the funding(\$15.1 million) will go to the State's local libraries'.

And so the media release goes on, a mish mash of spin and statistics. What it does not reveal is that the \$390,000 'increase' is nothing of the sort. In purchasing power terms it is *a reduction*. As a percentage of the 2005/2006 grant it is barely 2%. This is less than CPI and considerably less than the inflation factor for library acquisitions to which much of the grant is to be applied.

The reality worsens because 22% of the \$19.1 million will not be seen directly by local public libraries and local government. It is allocated elsewhere, apparently at the discretion of the Library Board of Qld and without formal consultation with councils or the Local Government Association of Qld. This lack of consultation, transparency, and lack of accountability to local government and public libraries, seems unlikely to inspire confidence in the process or strengthen the sense of partnership between state and local government. And how misleading in the release to imply that the state government, not local government, is the lead partner in providing the improved services for library users which it is claimed will be the outcome of the state's largesse.

What the media release does not reveal is the funding as percentage increases for each local government; how the 15 Indigenous knowledge centres (the establishment of which should have been funded as a specific government grant) are now being funded; and what percentage of annual state government outlays the public library grant is. In 2000 it was calculated as only 0.173%. It will now be even lower. In other words the government of The Smart State is not only funding local public libraries, relative to local government funding, much less in 2006/7 than seven years ago. It is also contributing relatively less from the state budget. Meanwhile the population of Queensland continues to grow, as do the demands on its public libraries.

Even the calculation that the state government is making a percentage contribution to public library operating costs in 2006/7 of around 14% is questionable. A number of councils in Queensland provide funding to libraries to maintain the quality of their collections and to undertake new initiatives which is placed in the capital expenditure line, not operating expenditure. This means that the state government may actually be contributing only 12% or even lower to the annual operating costs of some libraries.

The importance of collections

The lifeblood of public libraries remain, and will remain, their collections. It is in those collections that public libraries throughout Australia are now manifesting the failure of state and territory governments to maintain and extend their support of their public libraries in recent years. For example, a 2006 audit of collections in Victorian public libraries¹⁴ reveals the long term outcome of state government neglect of the funding of Victorian public libraries. That audit provides a salutary lesson for Queensland of the consequences of similar neglect, even though Victoria's state percentage contribution to public libraries hovers around 20%, higher than Queensland's.

Among the conclusions of the Victorian audit report are that

- if public libraries are to genuinely function as customer driven organisations, collections must be given a status consistent with the public's perception and supported by secure funding arrangements.
- the state collection is too small, too old and there is considerable inequity across Victoria
- one off funding of \$77.1 million is needed over three years to revitalise the collections of Victorian public libraries.
- recurrent funding need to be increased by 26% over current levels and annually adjusted to maintain real investment value.
- to secure consistent collection development funding and eliminate the potential for funding to be compromised by library services and councils, public library grants be restructured from a general grant to a specific grant to be applied only to collections.

This last point is an important one for public libraries in Queensland. In 2006/7 22% of the public library grant is apparently not directly available to individual public libraries for collection development. Moreover it seems that even some of the remaining 78% of the public library grant could be used for other than collections by councils. Whilst this flexibility may be advantageous, public libraries in Queensland could be on a slippery slide to a situation similar to that now confronting Victorian public libraries and their state government. What, one wonders, would be the findings from a thorough audit of public library collections in Queensland?

The politics

The \$600 million pa required to double Australia's low investment in its public libraries is, in national financial terms, insignificant. It is less than half of one per cent of the national expenditure on school education, and half the budget of just one medium size university.

Ironically, the very uniqueness and ubiquity of public libraries which is their greatest distinction and asset, is also the challenge in advocating for better investment in them. This is because they do not 'fit' neatly into any one area of governmental or bureaucratic responsibility. They tend to be placed in portfolios for the arts and culture when it is arguable that – as the most accessible agency for literacy development, self directed and lifelong learning, student support and home schooling – they should be placed within education, as has sometimes happened. In that sense, it is little recognised by Australian local government that it is now, largely through public libraries, a major player in the educational, learning and literacy business of Australia.

In 1904 Andrew Carnegie made the essential educational connection in observing that

If it is right that schools should be maintained by the whole community for the well being of the whole, it is right also that libraries should be so maintained.

More recently Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, when asked about his strong support for the revitalisation of Chicago's public library system, replied

Libraries and schools are on a par with each other in terms of what we are trying to accomplish – which is to better educate society. But the library scope extends even further than that of schools...A library is an innovator and should play an integral and active role in that effort in every community.

It is interesting that the current federal government now has public libraries within the arts ministerial portfolio, but the Labor opposition has them within the education and training shadow portfolio. This may prove to be significant, given that the federal government now intrudes significantly into the education arena in terms of standards, outcomes and funding. However the reality is that at the federal level there are at least seven ministerial portfolios on which the work and outcomes of public libraries impact, as Friends of Libraries Australia has discovered when sending its annual Reports to the Nation¹⁵ to the federal government for information and responses. Within state and territory

governments it is probably similar. Even at the local government level a council's library service will impact on, connect and should build partnerships with, several areas of the increasing responsibilities of councils. Examples are corporate council information service, information for small business, community information, tourism information, early childhood literacy support, family support, single parent support, youth services, services for older adults, the homebound, those with disabilities, refugees and migrants. The strengthening of public library ownership by, and within, government and the bureaucracy is a major challenge in achieving better recognition of what they do and better funding of them.

Sustaining the case for better public libraries is not made easier by Australia's three levels of government, and their tendency to buck pass. Public libraries are, of course, not the only casualties of this. However, regardless of who wins the 2007 federal election, an increased focus on performance by all levels of government, more federal scrutiny of state government accountabilities, and continued restructuring and strengthening of local government is predictable.

On the whole this should be beneficial to the modernisation and growth of Australia's public library infrastructure, but this requires the public library sector in Australia to rapidly sort out its own politics, which to date have seen only desultory efforts to

- analyse, summarise, communicate and capitalise on the wealth of international and Australian research on the economic, educational and social return on investment in public libraries¹⁶
- communicate why public libraries are important to so many people of all ages, circumstances and backgrounds
- bring local government to a deeper understanding of the importance of maximising its investment in its public libraries
- hold state/territory governments accountable for a true partnership with local government in developing better libraries for all
- engage the federal government in leadership of a national strategic framework for public libraries, and its own investment in that framework At the moment the federal government asserts a responsibility to interest itself, and intervene, in areas such as education, health, water, aged care, and infrastructure. About public libraries, however, there is still no such interest or concern. There needs to be, because local government and state/territory governments have too often proven to be unwilling or unable to deliver good and accessible modern public libraries to all in Australia.

There are positive signs coming from cooperation between the Australian Library and Information Association and Public Libraries Australia, but seizing the public library funding futures agenda needs to harden, and the pace quicken. In particular, if the federal government in 2008 does not provide the required leadership to the state/territories and local government in a national public libraries summit to deliver an Australian strategic framework for public libraries, those two associations should take the initiative. They would have the support of Friends of Libraries Australia, on behalf of the 12 million users of public libraries in Australia.

National and State Libraries Australasia also should consider just how far it, and its individual members, can really help drive the public library funding futures agenda for Australia. It needs to be recognised that its Australian members, the Director General of the National Library and the State/Territory Librarians, have constraints on them as public servants. They also have a primary responsibility to achieve the best funding outcomes for their *own* libraries, not for public libraries – an interesting tension of which governments may take advantage.

It is therefore commendable that in its service commitment the State Library of Queensland describes itself as 'an advocate for, and partner with public libraries across Queensland'. However for the two reasons given above, assertive State Library advocacy for better public library funding; overt criticism of the Queensland government; and support for approaches to the federal government, may understandably be difficult for it.

A final word

This paper has endeavoured to identify why, and how, Australia's Great Good Places receive only 8c per Australian per day – half of what the ABC now receives. It has proposed ways forward for the remediation of this in the context that

- the future for public libraries worldwide and in Australia has never been brighter
- the story and evidence of achievement, outcomes, benefits, and return on investment in them is substantial and irrefutable
- the economic capacity of the nation to greatly increase their funding, has never been better.

The core message of the paper is that the public library story now needs to be told in a focused and tenacious way to the Australian people, and to all levels of government in Australia. This will require vision, leadership and tenacity.

As Theodore Hesburg, the highly successful president of the US Notre Dame University observed a few years ago

The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you articulate profoundly on every occasion, you can't blow an uncertain trumpet.

A second key message is to be taken from one of those books is to be found in many of Australia's Great Good Places.

Charles Dicken's 1838 novel was his second, and the first in English to centre on a child protagonist. It is an indictment of social evil, politics and male dominated society. Yet only 12 years later 1850 saw the introduction into the House of Commons of the first Public Libraries Act which gave the imprimatur for free local government public libraries in the UK, and by derivation to those of Australia. It was truly an age of contradictions. Life for Oliver Twist and the other children in the parish workhouse was very hard.

Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

Please, sir, I want some more.

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

What! Said the master at length, in a faint voice.

Please, sir, replied Oliver, I want some more.

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in the arm; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said,

Mr Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!

There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

For MORE! Said Mr Limbkins. Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?

He did, sir, replied Bumble.

That boy will be hung, said the gentleman in the white waistcoat. I know that boy will be hung.

Hanging, of course, was not Oliver's fate. He eventually receives his reward, just as his tormenters receive their just deserts. It is a happy ending.

Oliver Twist dared to ask for more. *So, now, must we.*

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- 14 *Strategic asset audit of Victorian public libraries: an independent report for the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network* J L Management Services 2006
- 15 The annual FOLA Reports to the Nation are available at www.fola.org.au.
2004 *Australian Bookstart: a national issue, a compelling case*
2005 *Community critical: Australia's public libraries serving seniors*
2006 *Supporting students: the contribution of Australia's public libraries*
2007 *Looking ever forward: Australia's public libraries serving children and young people*
- 16 A particularly comprehensive and outstanding Australian report is *Libraries/building/communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries* Melbourne, State Library of Victoria 2005 available at www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/information/publications/policies_report/plu_lbc.html

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