

FOLA President's Report 2013

Friends of Libraries Australia was launched by its foundation patron, the Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG at the State Library of Victoria on 9 December 1994. At the beginning of my eighth and final report as FOLA President, I acknowledge its good fortune that another great Australian, Tom Keneally AO, has continued in that role since 2012.

Towards its vision of *Better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia*, 2013 saw FOLA continue its focus, at local and national levels, on public library advocacy and encouraging more local public library managers and their councils to recognise the return on investment if they initiate, foster and work with Library Friends within their communities. Examples of the value of Library Friends making the difference at critical times in a library's development continued to be identified and disseminated by FOLA through its newsletter *News Update* and its website

As just one example of the value of Library Friends, in a paper at the November 2013 conference *By design: public library places and spaces in Australia and New Zealand*, Jenny Mustey the Library Services Manager of Campaspe Shire in Victoria gave fulsome recognition of the contribution by Library Friends to achieving the fine new library in Echuca. As the published *Story of Echuca Friends of the Library: Roller coaster ride 1990-2012* by local historian Helen Coulson notes

The Friends were involved in all the moves towards a new library for 20 years. They were represented on a succession of committees, each with a different title – that laboured towards the goal: a new library for Echuca. By 1995 it was felt more lobbying action was needed so FOL changed from being simply a fund raising operation to a politically active force.

There are many other good news stories about Australia's public libraries – their new buildings and technology, their heavy and generally growing usage, their very high return on investment, and their community engagement and building initiatives. Nonetheless public libraries continue to struggle in the face of a perennial funding challenge. In no small part this is because they have been political meat in the sandwich of the insidious cost shifting from state governments to local government during at least the last two decades. Nowhere has this become more damaging than in New South Wales, where the public library profession, with the support of FOLA and other agencies, is now garnering public support for parliamentary petitions and a major campaign to change things. In seeking the support of FOLA for the campaign, coordinated by the NSW Public Library Associations, NSW local government councillors Graham Smith and Veronique Marchandean stated that

The campaign will rely very much on our ability to generate interest and action at the grass roots level and we need to identify local library supporters who can work with library managers and local councils to make representation to local members (of the NSW state parliament).

Those NSW public libraries with active and informed Friends of Libraries are well placed to respond to that need. Less so are those public libraries and their local councils which have yet to invest in initiating and fostering a Friends group, despite encouragement over the last 20 years by FOLA for them to do so. The overall strong public response to the NSW campaign shows that people do really care about the future of their libraries.

This state/local government funding imbroglio is a fundamental issue for the future of Australia's public library system. During my term as FOLA President it has persistently been drawn to the attention of national, state and local governments but with muted responses, and no recognition of the value of FOLA's long called for national review of Australia's public library system, the last such review occurring in 1974, 40 years ago. *There is no other publicly funded service used by such a high percentage of the Australian population of all ages and circumstances which has gone so long without review of its role, performance, and funding.* It is a need for Australian public libraries because although Australia now has a public library system accessible by nearly all – largely as an outcome of that 1974 review – it has manifest shortcomings, inequities, and funding difficulties which need the public exposure of a national review. Australia has some great, world-leading public libraries. It also has some of which the states and territories who – like education and health – have the primary constitutional responsibility for their provision, should be ashamed. Still, too

often, whether an Australian or immigrant child, adult or older adult has ready access to a good public library depends on where they happen to be born or live.

On a more positive note, the Melbourne Library Service, through its manager Paula Kelly, kindly hosted the 2012 FOLA AGM at its very busy city branch in Flinders Lane. This followed a well-attended FOLA seminar sponsored by CAVAL, focused on exciting library building developments in Melbourne, Geelong and Echuca.

Informing and encouraging new and existing Friends continued to be a FOLA focus during the year, through its website, newsletter, awards, and responses to enquiries about difficulties experienced by Friends and their libraries. One new feature to encourage such enquiries was a facilitating proforma on its website. The winner of the FOLA Peter McInnes Award for Services to Children was the Stirling Library of the Adelaide Hills Council, for an innovative program to improve library access for children with special needs. Also recognised with honorary life membership of FOLA was Christl Markovic, for 34 years an outstanding contributor to the Friends of the Stirling Library, now one of the largest, most innovative and well supported groups in Australia.

In its first 20 years FOLA has had small funds, no office, and no paid staff. It does receive appreciated support from some Australian library suppliers, most notably Bolinda Publishing since 1994, and also support from the University of Melbourne Library in the form of a venue and hospitality for its committee meetings. They are thanked for that invaluable support.

I thank, too, members of FOLA's national committee for their work during the year, and especially the retiring treasurer Kristina Barnett who again combined the role with that of Vice President. Murray Drinnan continued as FOLA's appreciated webmaster.

FOLA nears the celebration on 9 December 2014 in the State Library of Victoria, where it was launched on 9 December 1994, of its first 20 years as only the world's second such national organisation. Since then several other countries have followed that lead or are contemplating it, most recently South Korea which has invited FOLA's executive officer Daniel Ferguson to speak at a forthcoming 2014 public library conference.

During those two decades FOLA has had just 44 committee members, 3 presidents (Hon Margaret Lusink AM 1994-96, Peter McInnes 1997-2004, Alan Bundy AM 2004-2014 – in 1996-1997 the Hon John Cain and Colin Watson were acting presidents) Two treasurers have held office (Margaret Brooks 1994-2008, Kristina Barnett 2008-2014). FOLA has also gained from the national recognition, and support, of two patrons (Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG 1994-2011, Tom Keneally AO 2012-). All of those voluntary office bearers and committee members have contributed to FOLA's achievements and longevity, but none more so than FOLA's founder and honorary executive officer for the last 20 years, Daniel Ferguson.

FOLA exists because of his ideas, hard work and continuing commitment to the public good. It has been my privilege and pleasure to work closely with him during my term as President. FOLA is very fortunate that his contribution to it is likely to continue for some time yet. This is in the context that the most immediate challenge for FOLA and others is to start systematically capitalising on, and finding resources for, the most effective electronic, social media and other options to increase the community and political awareness of just what outstandingly good value public libraries are, and of their very high return on investment. The reality is that still too few people – including politicians and bureaucrats – in Australia know how, or how well, their libraries are funded; what their return on investment is; and what they should expect from a good public library service in the 21st century.

As the NSW library funding campaign illustrates, there will be advantage for public library advocacy to all levels of government if there is a strong national community user voice for better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia – and more Friends of Libraries are developed in NSW and elsewhere as the ongoing and well-informed voices of communities to state and local government about their libraries.

Dr Alan Bundy
President