

## FOLA President's Report 2012



Friends of Libraries Australia was launched, as only the second such national association in the world, 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 seventh report as FOLA President, I acknowledge its good fortune that in 2012 another great Australian, Tom Keneally AO, succeeded Michael Kirby to become FOLA's second national patron.

Less happily, I also acknowledge the passing on 9 July 2012 of Dr Peter Chippendale, a distinguished academic, educator, author, Fellow of the University of Sydney, and a member of FOLA's national committee, in which capacity he was instrumental in the rewriting of its constitution. He will be missed.

In its endeavours towards its vision of *Better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia*, 2012 saw FOLA continue its focus, at the local and national levels, on public library advocacy. Indicative of this was the awarding of just the second of its unique Colin Watson Award for Library Advocacy to the Friends of Port Macquarie Library in NSW. Other award winners were the Stirling Library, SA (Peter McInnes Award for Library Services for Children and Young Adults) and Rockhampton Regional Library Qld (Eric Flynn Award for Library Services for Older Adults).

A highlight of the year was the commencement in February of Australia's first National Year of Reading (NYR), a concept first proposed in FOLA's 2008 Report to the Nation *A nation reading for life: the challenge for public libraries* [www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au). The very high uptake of the NYR across Australia by public and school libraries in particular is very encouraging, and its impact will endure long past 2012. FOLA commenced early in 2011 alerting Friends of Libraries to the importance of the National Year of Reading, and the opportunities it would provide for their engagement with their libraries and communities in reading initiatives and programs.

Numbers of groups have done so to good effect. One example is the Friends of Echuca Library in Victoria, who on 24 August 2012 also participated in the opening of the fine new Echuca Library. This library has a reading focus in its design features and signage, and to it the Echuca Friends contributed \$46,000 as well as highly valued support to its Library Services Manager, Jenny Mustey, during the years of advocacy for the new library.

FOLA continues to hear about, and report on, the outcomes from effective partnerships between Library Friends, councils and their library managers. Yet across Australia more such partnerships are needed if public libraries are to prosper and meet their full community potential.

Just how to promote those partnerships, and particularly how to encourage library managers to initiate and support them, has challenged FOLA since its commencement as the voluntary and lean organisation it remains today. Consequently, during 2012 its national committee undertook, with valuable external assistance, a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis of FOLA – an exercise which all long established Library Friends are encouraged to undertake as they grapple with issues in common with many voluntary bodies, such as their role, functions, growing their memberships and achieving succession of long serving office bearers.

For FOLA, the *strengths* identified included

- It has an explicit and inclusive vision and objective – *Better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia* through the fostering of, advice to, and support of Friends of Libraries.
- As the only national voice of the 12 million users and the many more potential users of public libraries, FOLA can pursue advocacy for better libraries and their funding without the constraints or appearance of vested interest of professional library associations.
- It provides a renewed website [www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au) available to all, the *Friends of Libraries resource book*, an attractive quarterly newsletter *FOLA News Update* sponsored by Bolinda Publishing, and three sponsored national awards available to Library Friends and libraries.
- It provides free speakers for meetings and seminars at the request of proposed and established Friends of Libraries, and library managers.
- It is an effective respondent to national, state and local reviews impacting on library development and funding.

*Weaknesses* included

- Little ongoing funding, despite appeals for more sponsors and to philanthropic agencies.
- A very high dependence on the time and knowledge of its honorary executive officer.

- No funds to hold state and regional forums about why and how libraries, councils and their communities can benefit from Library Friends, or to participate in library conferences.
- No succession plan.
- No media guide or communications policy.

*Opportunities* included

- There are more Friends of Libraries in Australia than any other type of Friends, but there is potential for more of them as informed local voices of communities about the need for better libraries, and better funding for them.
- Public libraries are undergoing dynamic change and experiencing increasing use and valuation.

*Threats* included

- Changes in attitudes to volunteering and expectations of volunteers.

The outcomes of its SWOT analysis will require FOLA's ongoing attention in 2013, in particular how to improve its funding and communication with councils and their library managers.

Funding is a constraint, however, which only reinforces the inestimable value of the relatively few of the 50 or so Australian library suppliers who do sponsor FOLA, its endeavours and its awards. Those few are recognised on the FOLA website and in the *FOLA News Update*. Among them it is not invidious to highlight, and express publicly, appreciation of the generous support of Bolinda Publishing for FOLA since its inception in 1994.

I also express my appreciation of the contribution of FOLA's national committee during the year, and in particular that of FOLA's Vice President Kristina Barnett who again combined the role with that of treasurer. Murray Drinnan continued as FOLA's appreciated webmaster and Daniel Ferguson, the founder of FOLA and its long serving honorary executive director, is also thanked for his continuing enthusiasm and indefatigable work during the year.

The Friends of Campbelltown Library in South Australia kindly hosted the 2011 FOLA AGM in their large new library. It is a library which, like Echuca described above, speaks volumes for what can be achieved by effective partnership between Friends of Libraries, local government, and its library managers and staff.

Friends of Libraries can, and do, make a difference. Selling that message is the essence of FOLA's challenge in 2013 and beyond.

***Dr Alan Bundy***  
**President**