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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,
FOR THE OPENING OF THE 18TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
OF THE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA
MELBOURNE, 24 AUGUST 1975

I CONGRATULATE THE ORGANISERS OF THIS CONFERENCE ON BRINGING TOGETHER SUCH A REPRESENTATIVE AND DISTINGUISHED GATHERING OF LIBRARIANS, ADMINISTRATORS AND ALL THOSE CONCERNED WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBRARIES IN AUSTRALIA. THE SIZE AND SCOPE OF YOUR CONFERENCE ARE EVIDENCE OF THE STRENGTH OF YOUR ASSOCIATION, THE VIGOUR OF YOUR PROFESSION, AND THE PUBLIC'S GROWING AWARENESS OF THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN A FREE SOCIETY.

IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A MARKED CHANGE IN THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF WHAT A LIBRARY SHOULD BE AND WHAT SORT OF SERVICE IT OUGHT TO PROVIDE. WE NO LONGER THINK OF LIBRARIES AS MERE COLLECTIONS OF BOOKS. IT IS NOT SO MUCH THE MATERIAL RESOURCES OF A LIBRARY THAT COUNT - IMPORTANT AS THESE ARE - BUT HOW THESE RESOURCES ARE USED AND HOW THEY ARE MADE AVAILABLE TO THOSE WHO NEED THEM. THE LIBRARY'S FUNCTION IS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION. THE LIBRARIAN'S FUNCTION IS TO ORGANISE THAT INFORMATION AND ENSURE THAT EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO IT.

THESE FUNCTIONS ARE BASIC TO ANY CONCEPT OF TRUE DEMOCRACY. LIBRARIES THAT ARE FREE, OPEN AND ACCESSIBLE ARE JUST AS MUCH BASTIONS OF FREEDOM AS UNIVERSITIES OR PARLIAMENTS. FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS A PRECIOUS FREEDOM, BUT IT HAS A MUCH HIGHER VALUE, A MUCH RICHER SIGNIFICANCE, WHEN FREEDOM OF INFORMATION GOES WITH IT. EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO AN ILL-INFORMED OPINION, BUT ONLY THROUGH ACCESS TO INFORMATION CAN THE FREEDOM TO EXPRESS OPINIONS HAVE GENUINE VALUE. ONLY THROUGH ACCESS TO INFORMATION CAN FREEDOM OF SPEECH BE TRULY RELEVANT IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY.

I HOPE THIS WILL NOT SOUND TOO ELITIST A VIEW OR A THEME TOO REMOTE FROM YOUR PRESENT PREOCCUPATIONS. THE FREEDOM TO BE IGNORANT MAY WELL BE AS PRECIOUS AS THE RIGHT TO KNOW. I DOUBT, HOWEVER, IF LIBRARIANS WOULD ACCEPT THAT VIEW, I CERTAINLY DO NOT. I SIMPLY MAKE THE POINT THAT WHEREAS LIBRARIES WERE ONCE A FUNCTION OF LITERACY, THEY ARE RIGHTLY SEEN AS A FUNCTION OF LIBERTY. I NOTICED THAT IN YOUR SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC LIBRARIES - AN INQUIRY I SHALL DEAL WITH LATER - YOU QUOTED SOME WORDS OF ONE OF MY FORMER ADVISERS. NORMALLY, OF COURSE, THE DISCIPLES QUOTE THE MASTER, BUT IN THIS CASE I QUOTE THE DISCIPLE. JIM SPIGELMAN SAID IN 1972 AT THE 38TH SUMMER SCHOOL OF THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE :

"FREEDOM OF INFORMATION IS AS VITAL TO DEMOCRACY AS FREEDOM OF SPEECH. YET THE FORMER HAS NEVER ATTRACTED THE SAME DEGREE OF ATTENTION OR EMOTION AS THE LATTER."

IT IS ONLY LATELY THAT GOVERNMENTS HAVE COME TO RECOGNISE THE FORCE OF THIS ARGUMENT. I MENTION IT HERE BECAUSE IT IS RELEVANT NOT ONLY TO THE WORK OF YOUR PROFESSION BUT TO ONE OF THE BASIC POLICIES OF MY GOVERNMENT. THERE IS NO PART OF OUR PHILOSOPHY, NO PHRASE IN THE CURRENT POLITICAL VOCABULARY, SO POORLY UNDERSTOOD AS "OPEN GOVERNMENT". IT IS REGULARLY QUOTED BACK TO ME BY JOURNALISTS WHENEVER MINISTERS REFUSE TO ANSWER A QUESTION AT A PRESS CONFERENCE OR REFUSE TO DIVULGE THE DETAILS OF A CABINET DECISION. I SUPPOSE IT CAN BE ARGUED THAT IN AN IDEAL SOCIETY THERE WOULD BE NO SECRETS OF ANY KIND. FOR ALL THE PROGRESS WE HAVE MADE SINCE DECEMBER 1972, I CONFESS THAT THE IDEAL SOCIETY HAS YET TO BE ATTAINED. SO WE SHALL HAVE TO ACCEPT SOME CONFIDENTIALITY IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS. BY "OPEN GOVERNMENT", HOWEVER, WE INTEND SOMETHING DEEPER AND MORE IMPORTANT THAN CONTEMPORANEOUS DISCLOSURE. WE MEAN THE WIDEST POSSIBLE ACCESS TO REPORTS, TO STATISTICS, TO DOCUMENTS, TO THE RESULTS OF OFFICIAL INQUIRIES, TO FACTS, TO RECORDS OF EVERY KIND. WE MEAN SOMETHING MORE. PREVIOUS GOVERNMENTS FREQUENTLY AVOIDED RESPONSIBILITY FOR CERTAIN THINGS BY SAYING THEY WERE "STATE MATTERS". INEVITABLY THIS MEANT THAT VERY LITTLE EXPERT PUBLIC SERVICE ADVICE OR INFORMATION WAS AVAILABLE ON THESE SUBJECTS TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT. BY BRINGING TOGETHER THE BEST TALENTS IN THESE AREAS, BY OPENING UP THE WIDEST RANGE OF ADVICE, AND BY MAKING THAT ADVICE AVAILABLE TO ALL, WE HAVE VASTLY WIDENED THE VOLUME OF PUBLIC INFORMATION. LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS HAVE HELPED IN THAT PROCESS.

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OPEN GOVERNMENTS MEANS FREEDOM OF INFORMATION, AS
SURELY AS THE PARLIAMENT ENSHRINES, DEFENDS AND
MAINTAINS THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH, THE LIBRARY ENSHRINES,
DEFENDS AND MAINTAINS THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION.

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IN MY POLICY SPEECH IN 1972 I DEFINED LABOR'S BASIC OBJECTIVES IN THESE TERMS :-

- TO PROMOTE EQUALITY
- TO INVOLVE THE PEOPLE OF ^{AUSTRALIA} ~~THE~~ IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES
- TO LIBERATE THE TALENTS AND UPLIFT THE HORIZONS OF THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE

QUITE CLEARLY THE FULFILMENT OF THESE OBJECTIVES DEPENDS ON THE CULTIVATION OF A MORE AWARE AND BETTER INFORMED ELECTORATE. AMPLER OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION ARE A LONG-TERM ASPECT OF THIS PROCESS. IN THE SHORT TERM IT IS CLEAR THAT BETTER LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES, PROPERLY ORGANISED AND ADEQUATELY FUNDED, CAN RAISE THE LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE AND GENERAL SOPHISTICATION IN SOCIETY. IF PEOPLE ARE TO BE INVOLVED IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS THEY MUST KNOW HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE AND HOW POLITICAL ISSUES CAN BE JUDGED. LIBRARIES MUST ASSIST IN THIS PROCESS. AN INFORMED COMMUNITY IS BETTER EQUIPPED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS. AND TO "LIBERATE THE TALENTS AND UPLIFT THE HORIZONS" OF THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT PEOPLE BE AWARE OF THE OPPORTUNITIES, THE POSSIBILITIES FOR BETTERMENT AND REFORM, THE FEASIBILITY OF CHANGE THAT COMES FROM A GRASP OF CURRENT AFFAIRS INFORMED AND ENRICHED BY A KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY. HERE AGAIN THE LIBRARY, AS THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF INFORMATION, HAS A CENTRAL ROLE TO PLAY.

FOR A REFORMING GOVERNMENT THERE ARE OBVIOUS DEFICIENCIES IN THE LIBRARY SERVICES PROVIDED IN AUSTRALIA. THEIR MOST OBVIOUS DEFICIENCY LIES IN THE INEQUALITY OF THEIR STANDARDS. STANDARDS VARY SIGNIFICANTLY FROM STATE TO STATE AND WITHIN STATES AND WITHIN CITIES. I AM THINKING PARTICULARLY HERE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES. WITH NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS IN AUSTRALIA ARE LOWER THAN THOSE IN MANY OTHER COUNTRIES OF COMPARATIVE WEALTH. PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE THE BASIC RESPONSIBILITY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES WHICH RECEIVE ASSISTANCE FROM STATE GOVERNMENTS. GENERALLY SPEAKING THAT ASSISTANCE HAS BEEN INADEQUATE. LOCAL AUTHORITIES HAVE THEIR OWN FINANCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE RESOURCES ALLOCATED TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES HAVE USUALLY HAD A LOW PRIORITY. I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IN SOME STATES THE SCALE OF ASSISTANCE TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES HAS BEEN MARKEDLY INCREASED IN RECENT YEARS, BUT IT'S CLEAR FROM A SERIES OF AUTHORITATIVE REPORTS OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS THAT OVERALL STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE MUCH TOO LOW. CERTAINLY THE TASK OF PROVIDING EFFICIENT PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES IS MUCH MORE DIFFICULT IN THINLY POPULATED RURAL AREAS THAN IT IS IN COMPACT CENTRES OF POPULATION IN CITIES AND TOWNS. THERE IS NO REASON WHY THE CITIZENS OF MELBOURNE SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO BETTER LIBRARY SERVICES - GREATER FREEDOM OF INFORMATION\$ - THAN THE CITIZENS OF ECHUCA OR GEELONG.

ONE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S CENTRAL AMBITIONS HAS BEEN TO REDRESS INEQUALITIES BETWEEN REGIONS, BETWEEN CITY DWELLERS AND RESIDENTS OF COUNTRY TOWNS. WE BELIEVE THAT A PERSON'S STANDARD OF LIVING SHOULD NOT DEPEND ON WHERE HE LIVES OR IS OBLIGED TO LIVE. WE HAVE TAKEN A NUMBER OF STEPS TO ALLEVIATE THE FINANCIAL POSITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES AND PROVIDE MORE ADEQUATE AND UNIFORM PUBLIC LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES. FOR EXAMPLE, WE HAVE AMENDED THE GRANTS COMMISSION LEGISLATION TO ENABLE THE COMMISSION TO RECOMMEND GRANTS TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT ^{To} ~~IN A WAY~~ ~~THAT WILL~~ REDRESS REGIONAL INEQUALITIES IN THE SAMEWAY THAT INEQUALITIES BETWEEN STATES HAVE BEEN ALLEVIATED. LAST FINANCIAL YEAR \$56 MILLION WAS ALLOCATED TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT BODIES; IN 1975-76 ALMOST \$80 MILLION WILL BE GRANTED. THESE GRANTS SHOULD DO MUCH TO IMPROVE LOCAL LIBRARIES. IN ADDITION, THROUGH THE DEPARTMENT OF URBAN AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE GOVERNMENT IS DIRECTLY ASSISTING SOME LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE PROVISION OF LIBRARY SERVICES.

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IN MARCH THIS YEAR I ANNOUNCED THE APPOINTMENT OF A WIDE-RANGING COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN AUSTRALIA. THERE HAS BEEN A FULL AND ENCOURAGING RESPONSE TO THIS INQUIRY. THE COMMITTEE, UNDER THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF MR ^{ALLAN} HORTON, HAS ALREADY HELD 10 PUBLIC HEARINGS IN THE STATE CAPITALS, CANBERRA AND DARWIN AND 11 MORE HEARINGS IN REGIONAL CENTRES. IT HAS RECEIVED SOME 350 WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS, INCLUDING AN EXTENSIVE AND VALUABLE SUBMISSION FROM YOUR OWN ASSOCIATION.

WHAT WE ARE SEEKING ARE NOT JUST MORE BOOKS OR BETTER BUILDINGS BUT A COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY. THERE IS A LONG-TERM NEED TO CO-ORDINATE AND RATIONALISE ALL LIBRARY SERVICES. THERE IS SOME IRONY IN THE FACT THAT CHILDREN OFTEN HAVE ACCESS TO BETTER LIBRARY SERVICES THAN THEIR PARENTS. IN MANY AREAS THE ONLY LIBRARIES OF ANY KIND ARE THOSE IN SCHOOLS. IN SOME AREAS THERE IS NOT EVEN A SCHOOL LIBRARY WORTHY OF THE NAME. CONSIDERABLE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE HAS GONE TO SCHOOL AND TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL LIBRARIES BUT VERY LITTLE TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES. CLEARLY THERE IS A NEED TO CO-ORDINATE THE FUNDING OF SCHOOL AND GENERAL LIBRARY SERVICES IF THE BEST RESULTS ARE TO BE ACHIEVED. AGAIN, THE WORK OF CATALOGUING LIBRARY MATERIAL, COMPILING BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND REFERENCE SYSTEMS^{IS} IS FREQUENTLY DUPLICATED IN MANY LIBRARIES. THERE IS A NEED TO EXAMINE WHETHER A CENTRAL CATALOGUING AND INDEXING SERVICE IS MORE EFFICIENT. THESE ARE THE SORT OF QUESTIONS THAT MUST BE ANSWERED IN EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND DETERMINING THE BEST METHOD OF FUNDING THEM.

I SHOULD MENTION A FURTHER INITIATIVE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICE. EARLY LAST YEAR THE GOVERNMENT APPOINTED AN INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN AUSTRALIAN LIBRARY BASED INFORMATION SERVICE. THIS AROSE FROM A PROPOSAL MADE BY THE NATIONAL LIBRARY. IN THE BUDGET SPEECH LAST YEAR THE THEN TREASURER ANNOUNCED AN ALLOCATION OF MORE THAN \$1 MILLION FOR A FEASIBILITY STUDY INTO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SUCH A SERVICE. A STANDING INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE HAS BEEN APPOINTED TO SUPERVISE THESE STUDIES. ITS INQUIRIES ARE PROCEEDING.

IF ONE EXAMINES THE RECORD OF THIS GOVERNMENT ONE WILL SEE A BROAD AND CONSISTENT THEME - AN EMPHASIS ON THE SPREAD OF INFORMATION, ON WIDER ACCESS TO INFORMATION, AND WITHIN THIS CONTEXT, A GENERAL CULTIVATION OF LITERACY AND CULTURE. I DO NOT PRETEND THAT EVERYTHING IN THIS AREA BEARS DIRECTLY ON THE WORK OF LIBRARIANS, BUT OUR SUPPORT FOR LIBRARIES - A SUPPORT SPECIFICALLY PROCLAIMED IN MY POLICY SPEECH IN 1972 - IS PART OF THIS PROCESS. THERE IS, FOR EXAMPLE, A CLEAR LINK TO BE SEEN BETWEEN OUR CONCERN FOR THE MEDIA AND OUR CONCERN FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION.

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I EVIDENCE OUR INITIATIVES IN ACCESS RADIO AND ETHNIC RADIO STATIONS, IN OUR EXPANSION OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AT ALL LEVELS, IN THE PRIMACY WE GIVE TO PARLIAMENT AS THE HIGHEST FORUM OF OPEN POLITICAL DEBATE, IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL WITH ITS LITERATURE BOARD RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF AUSTRALIAN WRITING, IN OUR SUPPORT FOR AUTHORS THROUGH THE GRANTING OF A PUBLIC LENDING RIGHT, IN THE LIBERALISATION OF CENSORSHIP, IN OUR GENERAL FUNDING OF THE ARTS, IN OUR CONCERN FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND THE NATIONAL ESTATE, I SUGGEST THAT THROUGH ALL THESE POLICY INITIATIVES THERE RUNS A CONSISTENT THREAD OF ENLIGHTENMENT. IT IS CERTAINLY MY HOPE THAT GOVERNMENTS OF WHATEVER POLITICAL COLOUR WILL BE JUDGED AS MUCH BY THEIR POLICIES IN THESE AREAS AS BY THEIR POLICIES IN MORE PRACTICAL AND CONVENTIONAL FIELDS. IT IS HERE THAT OUR COMMITMENT TO THE HIGHEST VALUES OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVILIZATION IS REVEALED.

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THE FUTURE OF YOUR PROFESSION IS FULL OF PROMISE OF CHANGE AND INNOVATION. MODERN COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AND METHODS OF DATA PROCESSING OFFER REMARKABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MORE EFFICIENT LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES. THERE IS A MUCH GREATER AWARENESS - AMONG GOVERNMENTS AND AMONG THE PUBLIC - OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LIBRARY IN BROADENING OUR KNOWLEDGE, ELEVATING OUR STANDARDS OF TASTE AND CULTURE AND SAFEGUARDING OUR DEMOCRATIC VALUES. THE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA HAS A GREAT ROLE TO PLAY IN FURTHERING THIS PROCESS, IN IMPROVING THE STATUS OF YOUR PROFESSION, IN PROMOTING, ESTABLISHING AND IMPROVING LIBRARY SERVICES - IN SHORT, IN FULFILLING THE NOBLE OBJECTIVES OF YOUR CHARTER.

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