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Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Australasia Conference
Speech by Senator Russell Trood
Thursday 26 July 2007

RUSSELL TROOD: Good morning, are we still in the morning? Yes.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, it's a great privilege to be here this morning as I'm one of the co-chairs of the Library Committee. It's very indulgent of you to break with your conference to allow us to come along and speak to you.

My daughter has something of an interest in Jane Austin novels and in particular *Pride and Prejudice*. And we happened to be speaking about this last week in going through the book I came across this passage which struck me as entirely apt for this talk because I've never addressed a library conference before so I decided I needed to think seriously about what I might say. But I came across this passage in chapter 15 of the book which begins, some of you may know, 'Mr Collins was not a sensible man' and the character assassination proceeds from there. But in this particular passage the author is speaking of Mr Bennett and reflecting unfavourably on his unhappily forced interaction with Mr Collins. And the passage and he says or Jane Austin says in reflecting his views: 'in his library he had always been sure of leisure and tranquillity but prepared to meet with folly and conceit in every other room of the house, he was free from them there'.

The Parliamentary Library here is always tranquil ... it's not leisurely, because the Parliamentary Library librarians that I know are very industrious people. But I think I can be absolutely confident in saying that it's certainly free from or comparatively or relatively free from the conceit and folly that takes place in every other room.

(people laughing)

RUSSELL TROOD: I've been asked under the injunction from the Parliamentary Librarian to say a few things about myself and then perhaps say a view words about the recent survey that we have undertaken.

So in relation to those matters, my personal background, I was elected to the Senate from Queensland unlike Dick who's had a long distinguished career so far in the House of Representatives and the way the polls are this will no doubt continue at the end of the year. I was actually elected to the Senate for Queensland only at the last election in October 2004. I was the sixth Senator elected and that made me the 39th Senator on the Coalition side of the house. And some of my colleagues have noted that I have earned the opprobrium of being the person who gave the majority in the Senate to the Coalition or to the government.

I was elected after a long-standing, indeed a life-long interest in politics. But unlike Dick I've never had any experience in representative office prior to my election. I've had, I suppose, four career incarnations. This is my fourth career. I began modestly, I

think I can say, at Qantas shortly after school I quickly abandoned that for the law and I practiced law for a bit and my most recent incarnation before I came to the Senate was as an academic. I was Associate Professor of International Relations at Griffith University in Brisbane where I taught graduate and undergraduate classes, my main field was Australian foreign policy, Australia's relations with Asia, Asia-Pacific security, international organisations, the whole bundle of things that relates to international relations.

And for my sins I was for about a decade at Griffith, the Director of a small research centre, the Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, know happily as CSAAR, which did research and I must say I'm proud of the very distinguished list of publications that we undertook, most of which I hope, I'm sure are in this library and some of you will be familiar with them I hope because they've made an important contribution to Australia's—in particular—Australia's engagement with Asia and there is a ... there's a set of memoirs there from people in the foreign service and the like that I think have made a very important contribution to Australian letters.

So I'm now only two years into a six year term and happily, unlike Dick, I'm not facing an election, due to the nature of the Senate, at the end of the year. Although unhappily, I'm in the Liberal Party.

You all know that the Senate's constitutional role is nominally to represent the states. I think that's probably less so than what used to be the case or at least in the minds of the founding fathers, we tend to be very much party representatives these days in the Senate.

But I've discovered since being elected the remarkable diversity of responsibilities that a senator has. Members of the House of Representatives with whom I'm familiar and I'm sure Dick has (inaudible) his colleges (inaudible) and Lyn will know this, they say well you don't have constituents, you don't ever see a constituent do you? I'm sure that's not true for a Democrat Senator. And in fact it's not true for a Liberal Senator I've discovered. In fact I made a particular point of setting my office up in a Labor area of Brisbane—it's Labor at every level of government, local government, state government and federal government. And I decided that the good folks of Forest Lake, which is where it is, deserved to see what a Liberal looked like. So I went and plonked my office down there and I've discovered that senators sometimes have constituents which has proved very interesting.

But of course the range of responsibilities is much wider than that. It covers of course the legislative work in the Chamber and on committees in particular, in the Senate, but when one's a Liberal or a government senator there are quite a lot of Ministerial representations. I've discovered ministers who are too busy to do things ask you to go out and represent them at activities.

The thing that struck me as quite interesting is the degree to which lobbyists are on one's door on a regular basis and they cover the whole gamut of activities that reflects legislation going through the Parliament. And that was something for which I was ill prepared.

But the committee work is a central part of the Senate's activity and that—from my perspective—is a very interesting part of it. I'm a member of the two forms of committees in the building: the Senate Committee and the Joint Committees. The Senate Committee: I'm a member of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee not surprisingly and also the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee. And a member of a couple of other joint committees.

Until recently and I don't think I've told you this Dick, I've actually been pushed off the Treaties Committee, we had to reorganise our affairs in the Senate because of the arrival of some new Senators so I was moved aside for a new colleague from South Australia. So I was on the Treaties Committee for a while with Dick. But I'm also on the Joint Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

But most importantly I think for the purpose of this exercise and indeed my own situation is I'm one of the co-chairs with Dick of the Joint Standing Committee on the Parliamentary Library. This is a very odd animal in some respects.

I don't know, I might just spend a minute explaining this; you may not be familiar with it. It has oversighted the Library. There used to be a House Committee and a Senate Committee separately and some ... a year or so ago the Presiding Officers decided in their wisdom they ought to be combined.

So they created this Joint Committee and decided in their wisdom that it ought to have co-chairs—unpaid, which is unusual for committees in the building—and that one member of the committee, one co-chair should come from the House of Representatives and one co-chair should come from the Senate. And if that wasn't a considerable enough complication that they should come from different parties.

Now who in their right mind would create an animal ... this seems to me almost a recipe for immobilisation and lack of progress, some sort of wicked and devious mind could only have created this kind of committee. But in fact it works pretty well. We've only been going for about 12 months I suppose but perhaps not even that long and it works pretty well. Dick and I see each other in the swimming pool in the morning and we work out committee affairs reasonably easily and move forward.

Let me just say a few things about the Library now. I'm very familiar with libraries of course coming from an academic background but this a particularly fabulous resource that the nation has and indeed the Parliament has. It's difficult to see how life as a politician could continue without having this particular resource in the building.

When I became co-chair and I think I'm called the senior co-chair or at least the one who chairs the meetings as it happens. I said that I had two primary aims. One was to try and make sure that during the period that I was one of the co-chairs that we maintain the integrity of the collection and of the library services more generally. And secondly that we ensured that it remained readily accessible to all of the people in the building and that we wouldn't want to fall into the situation where by virtue of limited resources that their might be an inclination to exclude people from its services. And I hope and I think we're certainly on that course and I hope we'll continue along that course.

I probably should've added that and made special mention of the particular challenges of the budget of the library and more particularly made mention of the costs involved in digitisation which of course is a very considerable cost for most libraries.

However the greatest challenge I've discovered since taking on this responsibility is trying to corral the members of the Library Committee to come to a meeting at a common time. This has proved a profound challenge, one that I hadn't imagined.

As I said it's very tranquil here today, there are no bells ringing or anything like that because the Parliament isn't sitting but you all know what it's like to be working in a parliamentary environment, you all know that how the bells ring and the great challenge we've had is trying to find a time when we can all meet when the bells didn't go off and half or greater numbers of our members disappear. So I think most of the decisions that we've made have probably been unconstitutional Roxanne, since we met. But nevertheless they're recorded in the minutes, including my remarks about what I hope the library would do.

And of course information is absolutely key to the work one does as a Senator both from the collection in the Library and of course from the research and the analysis. Canberra of course is remarkably well served for libraries and in some sense there is always the book or the journal or the piece of information somewhere in one of the resources, either in ANU or Canberra University or the National Library more particularly, if it's not in this particular building.

So I think the resource that I most value is the research capacity that exists here in the library which can be very specifically tailored to the needs of individual senators and members. And I suspect that's probably true of many people that work in the building.

And we did the survey, well the library, I had nothing to do with it except that I looked at it and did the survey. The library undertook the survey early this year. The last time a survey was done was 2002 I think and so we hadn't done one for five years or so. It was an online or print survey and not only was there a survey document, there was focus groups that followed-up to try and get a sense of the way in which the library services were being used. It was a survey for essentially all users of the library, so senators and members and their staff, people within the departments of the library and all of the people in the building essentially who make use of the library services—and outside of course, people in electorate offices, my staff, members staff and so on.

We had I think 223 responses to the survey and happily for a co-chair of the library committee the library services were regarded as being—the people who use the library services is a better way to put it—regarded themselves as very satisfied. The figure there was 89 per cent of the respondents regarded themselves as satisfied with the library services.

I note Dick that this is an increase. The last time the survey—and I think we probably need to take credit for this—it's up from 85 per cent from last time. So the four per cent increase—as you know politicians pay a lot interest in percentages—so I think

Dick and I ... although he's been on the Library Committee a long while, I think it's only a relatively short time he's been co-chair so I don't see why we shouldn't take credit for this.

LYN ALLISON: I see I'm being left out.

(people laughing)

DICK ADAMS: My election material this year.

RUSSELL TROOD: Well it's a winner (inaudible) increase your majority (inaudible).

And more happily perhaps, 99 per cent of the people who responded said they'd be prepared to refer the library services to their colleagues so I suppose that's encouraging.

The clients who responded were very much aware of the range of services which the library offers. And 80 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they met their particular needs.

But of course there's no point in a survey unless it seeks to uncover some of the problems or the issues that might confront libraries. And there was a range of issues which people expressed as being a matter of concern. And perhaps I can just mention those very briefly.

First of all the desire or a need for greater consistency in the provision of services, particularly in relation of communication between the Library and its clients. Consistency in the delivery of services was an issue that emerged. And tailoring responses to the clients' needs, there's some suggestion that we might be able to do that somewhat better.

Secondly, a broad expression of concern about the timeliness of some of the libraries activities or the library publications and in particularly in relation to the Bills Digest, the real challenge of course in parliamentary libraries is getting the Bills Digest out so we know what legislation is about, I suspect that's a common problem for every parliamentary library in the country and perhaps around the know democratic world.

Thirdly, better communication with clients to improve their understanding of the library services.

Forth, improved online services. Of course increasingly we are making demands for information via our computers, whether we are in the building or at our electorate offices and there was some expression about that particularly in relation to our Media Monitoring Service which is now being extended.

Fifth, a need to improve the online services, particularly to get them down to the desktop so not only to have them in the Library here if they might be assessable but in the offices at the desktop so they are readily available when needed.

And finally, an improved means of letting clients know which particular services were available to the Library, what resources were relevant to them, I think this a matter of the Library doing a bit of marketing of its services and it's kind of things that one can draw on.

But as you can see the, for the most part the Library received very encouraging support. And we draw from this some priorities for the next year or so and of course we can draw them further out. The need to focus on client service and quality. Improving the collection, of course is always a challenge. The services to desktop I think is a priority for the next 12 months. And collaboration, linking libraries up more effectively which seems almost an impossible task because I know how well linked libraries are linked these days but if we can take that further then it'll better for parliamentarians in this building anyway. And of course one can't avoid the challenge which I suspect is common to all of us, the need for funding and how we're going to sustain funding in the context of tighter budgets and increasing demands for all sorts of things.

But in conclusion ladies and gentlemen I think we're immensely fortunate to have this resource and at the federal level I'm sure every state parliamentarian would say the same thing about the services you provide but I'm very conscious of it here. As I said it's very difficult to imagine that life could continue as a politician with all of the demands that are made for information without having the Library. And my limited experience of the Library, two years actually as a senator, is that there is an immensely dedicated and professional staff here that will do much of what they can and go beyond what is almost humanly physically possible to serve the needs of their clients and from my perspective it makes it a great privilege to be the co-chair of the Library and to be here making use of its services.

Thank you very much.

(applause)