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“Cut libraries – see wot hapens”

The Library Campaign: Supporting Friends and Users of Libraries. A British perspective

The Library Campaign sees itself as an Umbrella Group for Friends and Users of Libraries. Its main purpose is to create a general awareness for libraries and in that way to ensure general standards of service in libraries.

I was elected Chairman of “The Library Campaign – supporting Friends and Users of Libraries” (TLC) at its Annual General Meeting in May 2004 and have just been re-elected for a further term. So I thought I had better introduce myself and present my credentials for being the Chairman of a Library *User* Group.

Although I am a Chartered Member of CILIP¹ – and I was, in fact, the last person ever to be awarded a Certificate of Merit by CILIP’s predecessor, the former (British) Library Association, for my services to the profession – I have not worked in public libraries or any other publicly funded library for 40 years.

I have been, and still am, a genuine library user. Becoming a library user and observing them from the outside has been a salutary experience and was one of my motives for getting involved with the Campaign when it began some 20 years ago.

I have also spent 38 years teaching librarianship at what is now the University of Central England, and though I took early retirement in 2003 I still do some teaching on public librarianship, mainly because there is no one else left to do it!

I agreed to stand for election as Chairman of the Campaign because I had long felt that we needed someone to be a figurehead, someone with experience and someone with a high profile to provide some leadership for the Campaign. This is not, in any way, to decry the admirable and outstanding work done by the various officers of the Campaign over the years, notably Andrew Coburn as Hon. Secretary and the two Directors we have had over that period.

¹ The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

Charitable status in Britain is enormously important

The resignation of Jill Wight, our last Director, for whom I always had enormous admiration, coincided with the gaining of charitable status and the subsequent new constitution and re-alignment of the Campaign, all of which provided us with an opportunity to re-assess our priorities. Charitable status in Britain is enormously important both for tax purposes and for attracting appropriate sponsorship. The Campaign had for many years been denied this status ostensibly because of our political connections and aspirations.

Rightly or wrongly, the Campaign had been seen by many senior librarians as part of the trade union movement, concerned primarily with improving the lot of library workers. Our re-alignment to become primarily an umbrella group for Friends and User Groups opens up new challenges and opportunities, and as we achieve better libraries so the lot of library workers will also improve.

Pro-active action for better libraries

I have pledged myself to lead from the front and to take pro-active action in our campaign for better libraries. This is a busy time with the introduction of the new Public Library Service Standards, the adverse publicity for libraries achieved by the infamous Coates Report, and the recently published House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report into government policy on public libraries, for which the Campaign have submitted evidence. Alas we were not called to give oral evidence despite the government's alleged emphasis on consulting users of public services.

One of the first steps of the government when it came into power in 1997 was the introduction of "New Library – the People's Network". A scheme, backed by a considerable sum of money both for the system and for staff training, to ensure that Internet access was available to everyone in the UK via their local public library.

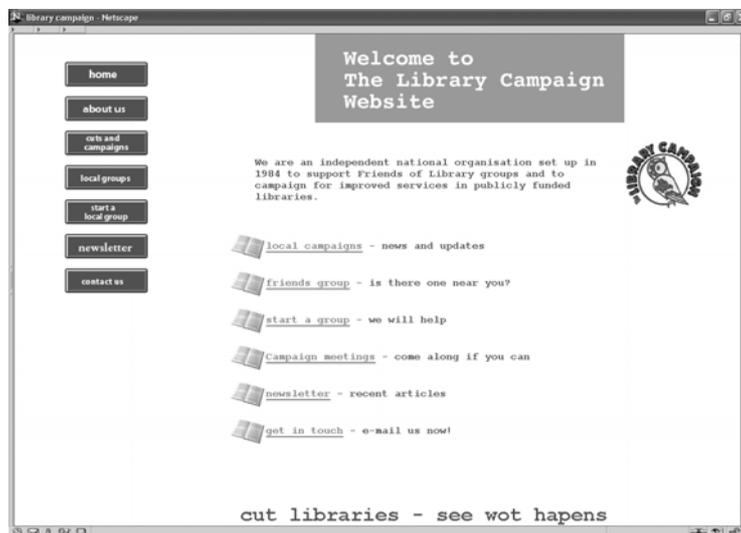
Some parts of government have done their 'bit' for public libraries

The infrastructure is now in place and staff have been trained appropriately. However, I have a feeling that with the introduction of People's Network, there is a perception in some parts of government that they have done their 'bit' for public libraries and that they can now safely be put on the back burner. We have to adopt a high profile to ensure that this does not happen.

Quite a lot has happened in the last few months. The new Website has been developed and will be up and running very shortly. Our website designer has

done a splendid job in providing us with a very user- friendly skeletal structure that can be edited easily and quickly.

Ideally, the Executive Committee would like someone to volunteer to be the Campaign’s Webmaster to do the necessary updating as and when necessary. We would like to extend the website so that individual member groups can have their own space within the overall site to publicise and promote their own activities.



The Library Campaign’s website: <http://www.librarycampaign.co.uk/>

Cooperation between friends of libraries & friends of museums

I have recently had meetings with both the Hon. Secretary of the British Association of Friends of Museums (BAFM) and the Campaign’s own Membership Officer. Both meetings proved to be extremely useful and productive. BAFM and TLC are exploring ways in which our two organisations could work more closely together and we are currently setting up a meeting in Bristol to work out more detailed proposals. Our first step however was a joint session at the MUREX/LIS Show² at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham in April.

² Museums resources Exhibition / Library and Information.

TLC's Membership Officer has done a splendid job with our membership database and our Executive Committee decided at its meeting in January to use some of the money currently being saved by not employing a Director at present to buy a couple of days of her time so that she can improve it still further. This she has now done.

Government's representatives – re-inventing the wheel

The Campaign also received a very favourable and supportive response from CILIP's Chief Executive, Bob McKee, who has not only pledged his support but has also indicated his wish that CILIP should become a member of TLC.

I attended one of the sessions of the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture Media and Sport's Inquiry into Public Libraries on the day when CILIP, the Society of Chief Librarians and the Audit Commission all gave evidence. Bob McKee and Maggie Haines (CILIP President) both spoke well, ably supported by Catherine Blanshard of the Society of Chief Librarians. It was disappointing to hear representatives from the Audit Commission (the Government's 'watchdog' on public expenditure) re-inventing the wheel, e. g. the novel idea (sic) of dual-function libraries was floated, and all their talk was of value for money and performance measurements.

To 'lie in the road' to defend public libraries

It took the Chairman, Sir Gerald Kauffman to remind them, to his everlasting credit, that public libraries were part of that mid-19th century municipal socialism which saw public libraries as institutions that would be of benefit to the community and he undertook to 'lie in the road' to defend public libraries. Bob McKee offered to join him there!

The other major event in recent weeks has been the latest of our regular meetings with Andrew Stevens at the MLAC.³ Andrew showed us the Powerpoint presentation on the Marketing Strategy soon to be deployed by MLAC. It was an impressive display and if promoted properly should prove to be very valuable in getting wider recognition and support for the work of public libraries.

³ The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council – a government organisation to advise on policy in these areas.

An Umbrella Group for Friends and Users of Libraries

What can we do as an Umbrella Group for Friends and Users of Libraries? Our aims are:

To advance the lifelong education of the public by the promotion, support, assistance and improvement of libraries through the activities of Friends’ and Users’ groups.

To this end we are endeavouring to encourage more individuals to join local groups and the TLC nationally; to take up issues on behalf of users; and to inform and keep informed Friends’ and Users’ Groups.

There are three main types of groups to support:

- 1 Those Friends Groups set up autonomously to act as a pressure group on their local authorities to provide better services. They have a very valuable role in providing feedback from genuine users and represent genuine consultation with users – at least for those with recognition and support from their local libraries.
- 2 Those Friends Groups set up for specific purposes – to fight the closure of a particular library usually. These frequently disband when the battle has been won (or lost).
- 3 Those Friends Groups set up by library authorities as a way of ensuring feedback from users. These can work well but there is some evidence that libraries are using them or set them up primarily as fund-raising organisations. I confess to some feelings of unease about this. It is not the responsibility of users to fund libraries though I have no problem with gifts from Friends Groups being used for the purchase of a special piece of equipment for a children’s library for example. It is the responsibility of library authorities to provide adequate funding for basic library services.

Providing to ‘rally the troops’

Over the years the Campaign has offered help and support to many groups whether it be in providing professional knowledge and guidance on the availability of statistics, how to run organisations, how to raise funds or how to get local publicity. We also have a Starter Pack for such groups which is currently being revised.

The Campaign is also working hard on our relationship with suppliers of library books and other resources, furniture, fittings and systems. Our overall

aims are the same – we all want and need a healthy public library system and their support and sponsorship over the years has been invaluable.

We have provided speakers to go to group meetings or local community group meetings to ‘rally the troops’ – to give practical and moral support for their current campaign. We have also provided speakers for local political groups to help them devise policies on which to fight elections and I doing so have often recruited members.

Libraries *are* a political issue

One of the curious things I have learned on my travels around the country is just how ignorant local elected members of local authorities are concerning the role and purpose of public libraries. “There are no votes in public libraries,” is the oft-heard cry from such people. They get a nasty shock when they start to suggest the closure of local libraries but perhaps we ought to be making much more noise locally all the time to create an awareness of the vital roles public libraries play in the local economy, in lifelong learning and in the lives of ordinary men, women and children. Libraries *are* a political issue and free access to information is an essential component of a democratic society.

We need to be vigilant to ensure that standards of service are not eroded. For example, there are reports that some library authorities (between 20-25 %) are now charging users to access the Internet through their public libraries. This is a denial of the whole purpose of the ‘People’s Network’ but there is a major problem here. Although the government was generous in its initial outlay, it made no provision for ongoing costs or for the renewal of computers as they became obsolete. The result is that libraries either cut down even further on their book purchases or that they charge for Internet access. Given that the percentage of library budgets spent on book purchase is currently under 10 % in most library authorities, cutting such expenditure is not a politically acceptable option. The alternative is to charge for Internet access – which is also unacceptable.

Any organisation is only as strong as its members and we are trying very hard to increase our membership base in order to maintain and improve standards of public library provision nationwide. We are also currently seeking to identify and get as members more of the many Friends and User Groups that we know exist around the country. Many such groups exist but are not yet affiliated to the Library campaign.

It has been said that one measure of how civilised a country has become is the degree to which it supports its public library service. If we can all unite as a nationwide Campaigning Body we can be that much more effective and demonstrate that Britain is amongst the most civilised countries in the world.