

Libraries in a democratic society

I was honoured to be asked to speak at this Conference. I understand that your last two gatherings were held in Peebles and Killarney, both delightful places of course. But please accept my congratulations on your decision to hold this year's event at a capital city. I therefore offer you a "Croeso cynnes i Cymry ag i Caerdydd" – a warm welcome to Wales and to Cardiff.

The theme you have asked me to address is the "role of libraries in a democratic society" and it immediately occurred to me that a good starting point was Marx who - with his usual mastery of the dialectic - said: "Outside a dog, a book is a man's best friend... Inside a dog, it's too dark to read." That, of course, was not comrade Karl – it was Brother Groucho...

Logically immaculate though that perception was, it lacked the elegance and precision of Andrew Carnegie who made the direct link between liberties and libraries when he said: "There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the Earth as the Free Public Library - this republic of letters, where neither rank, nor office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration."

That was in the days when philanthropy – at least for givers like Carnegie – was mainly directed towards emancipation of minds and enrichment of spirits rather than – so we are led to believe – part payment for control of Academy Schools and the prospect of a gong or a seat in the House of Lords...

His provision for libraries was, in any event, life changing for countless numbers of people. And Carnegie's certainty of enlightened purpose and his connection between

free access to knowledge and freedom itself were, as this audience will know better than most, evidence of almost revolutionary thinking at the time.

For most of the previous 4000 years - from Mesopotamian civilisation through the Ptolemies, the Muslim empire, Renaissance Italy, and into Victorian times - libraries were a source of reference for the already powerful and their retainers rather than a facility for wider society and those who, in today's jargon, would be called the "information poor".

Even by the Industrial Revolution when the need for – and the development of – the first "knowledge economy" was manifest, a paranoid Establishment was still unsure of its attitude to public education and accessible libraries. Some unrelentingly regarded "book learning" to be nourishment for insurrectionary mischief. Others divided into the patronising who hoped that schools and libraries would encourage social acquiescence among the masses and more valiant spirits who feared that opiate outcome.

And, as ever, there were also those who criticised the vehicles of knowledge that did exist for the compromises that they made with solemnity.

For instance, those most worthy Victorian agencies of self improvement, the Mechanics' Institutes, were scorned by a Dr J W Hudson, of the Greenwich Society for the Acquisition and Diffusion of Useful Knowledge who declared that "two injudicious courses had been followed" by the Institutes and their libraries:

"Those", he said, "which ... rejected novels from the library and newspapers from the reading room have, for the most part, become extinct ... Others have been lead into unhealthy excitement by weekly lectures, frequent concerts, ventriloquism, and

Shakespearean readings, directing their chief energies into a wrong channel and involving the Mechanics' Societies in debt and difficulty.”

That might have been one of the first contributions to the debate about whether libraries should facilitate entertainment and Dr Hudson's “unhealthy excitement” or stick soberly to scholasticism and sombre pursuits. As this audience will know, it certainly wasn't the last word in that disputation in the last 150 years.

No-one here will need me to say, however, that whilst no comparable exchange of fire between pragmatists and purists appears to be raging now, other challenges continue to test those who provide libraries, whether in local communities or in institutions of reference and learning.

In my interested but admittedly inexperienced view, some of those challenges – as ever – relate to strengthening public understanding of the nature, purpose and significance of public library use.

For instance, dispelling the outmoded and inaccurate perception of libraries as fusty places dominated by fanatical Trappists, and gaining recognition of the fact that many more people use libraries than go to the cinema or to football grounds, is not just necessary in order to demonstrate relevance, popularity and value for money. It is also essential for the purpose of demonstrating that, in this democracy, there are no real physical or cultural impediments to gaining – and there should be no inhibitions about using - access to the wealth of relaxation, fun, information, inspiration and enlightenment stowed in and through libraries and made available with the aid of qualified expert helpers.

A second challenge relates to the way in which libraries can become even more effective instruments of knowledge diffusion – of “outreach” – so that they can increase capacity for tackling social exclusion and functional illiteracy.

And thirdly, there is a need for extra commitment to utilising on-line content and increasing access to archives in an age when internet use is superseding the use of books and TV watching.

It is self evident that continuing and increasing developments of that kind are essential for the purpose of advancing and spreading the human capacities necessary for achieving a consistently competitive and efficient economy, and for ensuring public services that efficiently, sensitively, and accountably meet modern needs.

But whilst the contribution that can be made by libraries to “the knowledge economy” is clear, I also believe that comparable importance must be attached to the importance of libraries for fostering what I call “the knowledge democracy”. I’ll outline what I mean by that:

Without imagining that there was ever a “Golden Age” of democratic interest and participation in our countries, it is impossible not to recognise that there is decline in voter turnout, increased reluctance to engage in Party political activity, and more evident perplexity and scepticism about the value and purpose of political involvement.

Responsibility for such trends in attitude and behaviour can – and probably should – be attributed in substantial part to politicians and Parties. In addition, the incessant cynicism and, for want of a better phrase, “dumbing down” projected by parts of the

Press and other sources of opinion formation may be – probably are – further partial causes of the drift from democratic engagement.

I make no attempt to make a comprehensive diagnosis or to suggest ready remedies for that recognisable and regrettable reality. Those are for other times and places.

All I do say is that, whatever else they mean, the negative movements in attitude and engagement do not signify a strengthening of democracy or of the values and activity needed to sustain its vitality. I further believe that, whatever else has to be done to alter these conditions, the most vital antidotes to apathy, scepticism and further disengagement have to be education and information to foster understanding and to provide the equipment of democratic expression.

Plainly, that is not a revelation. “Knowledge is power” is a truism that has been understood throughout the ages by the powerful and by those striving for power, particularly those seeking democratic emancipation. What is equally true – but less frequently acknowledged – is that whilst knowledge certainly is power, in democracy ignorance is not without significant influence either.

Making the former more accessible and, by that means, helping to combat the latter is obviously a critically important function for formal education at all ages. But because the need for information and awareness extends throughout life, libraries have a particular relevance to efforts to improve the health of a discerning democracy and to encourage and equip the exercising of informed rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

On that basis, those who value libraries – and few in authority will admit that they don't - could and should be more aware of the role and potential of libraries in

nourishing democracy and democratic activities, and those who run libraries could be more assertive about the civic value of the service they provide.

I realise, of course, that the resources available to libraries for the purpose of intensifying and extending such activities are limited – indeed in the UK overall resources for public libraries have declined in real terms in the last decade.

Some might seek to justify that by referring to the persisting fall in book issues by public libraries. They would be mistaken because, as this audience knows better than any, numbers of people visiting libraries and the use of computer workstations in libraries are increasing. Comparable developments have obviously been noticeable in University libraries which, happily, have not suffered net reductions in finance.

The rise in the public's vocational and personal need for knowledge – and for the means of reaching and using it – warrants an increase, not a decrease in funding. That can certainly be justified as a response to the demand for the discovery and continual development of functional skills. But the case for higher financial commitment is also supported by the broader cultural and democratic enablement and enrichment made available by libraries as a critical core community amenity.

People who provide and operate libraries now, I know, have a long tradition of innovation which includes increasing opening hours, sharing premises with other community facilities, working with voluntary groups and professionals in health and other neighbourhood services – the much longer list of initiatives is diverse, impressive and productive. It deserves a positive response, specifically from decision makers who continually – and rightly – emphasize the importance of technical and economic competence and – repeatedly but somewhat more vaguely – urge the

strengthening of cultural expression and active citizenship. That gap between words and wherewithal needs to be closed.

It was commitment to objectives of learning and cultural and civil development, of course, which ensured that the British Council became a library provider from its first years of operation in the mid 1930s. Today, over 300,000 people are members of our libraries in many of the 109 countries in which we operate overseas.

For much of the 70 odd years of our existence, our library provision took the traditional book lending form and demand was generally confined to small numbers of people who were either affluent or were striving to get out of poverty with sometimes superhuman sacrifice and determination.

Two particular developments have, however, made change necessary.

First, the huge increase in access to higher education, particularly in European and Asian countries, has brought a proportionate rise in the numbers seeking to use the British Council's educational services. Second, it has been impossible for British Council budgets to keep pace with the exponential growth in published books and documents and, over the last decade, the Council has recognised that it could not afford the representational collections of books which had been typical of its libraries.

As a consequence of these and other cost and technical realities, we radically changed our library offer overseas so that, throughout the last 5 years, the Council has introduced a mixture of "bricks" and "clicks": It has meant installing ICT-based knowledge and learning facilities across fifty or so of our most important centres, expanding our on-line information and other services which are used monthly by a

total of 1.5 m people, and retaining an element of more traditional library provision of books, magazines, newspapers and printed material.

Unsurprisingly, the Council has met resistance wherever it has sought to rationalise services in the direction of on-line provision. A prominent Indian diplomat once said: "If the British High Commission seeks to close a consulate in an Indian city, there will be a few letters in the Press. But if the British Council sought to close one of its libraries, there would be riots in the streets." He wasn't exaggerating... When our Director in India sought to close our library in Lucknow a few years ago there were street protests - and his effigy was burnt by the protesters.

A clear message was being communicated, somewhat luridly. It was that whilst people acknowledge the capacity of the internet as a vehicle that provides content, they have suspicions about much of that content, and they continue to value physical presence. People who use our facilities repeatedly affirm that internet access alone does not and cannot provide an essential element – and that is the trust which is at its strongest where there is face-to-face contact and community.

That reality does, of course, produce paradoxes in our international experience: Many here will have seen the TV pictures of the wrecking of the British Council Centres – including libraries - in Gaza and Ramallah on March 14th. The irony was that these events coincided with production of the results of independent market research which showed that, of all the international organisations operating in the Palestinian Territories, the British Council is viewed as being of most relevance to the needs of ordinary Palestinians and – crucially - is the most trusted.

The political justification claimed for the attacks on our Centres by the destroyers were – to put it mildly – less than convincing to the young Palestinians who depend

on those facilities for access to knowledge and educational opportunity. We are, of course, continuing to function in Gaza and Ramallah and will develop accessible, but more secure, Centres.

Because of similar demand for British Council facilities in Addis Ababa, Cairo, Delhi, Dhaka and many other places around the World, registration days for Council libraries still produce queues around the block. And while we can and do engage many millions in a relationship with the UK through our on-line work and through arts and science events, access to libraries continues to be a highly valued and very effective means of drawing younger people into an understanding of the UK's values and creativity whilst providing them with critically important learning and research opportunities.

What can broadly be called our "library activities" are clearly not limited to being providers in Centres, Universities and schools. Throughout the years since the collapse of the Soviet empire, and in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, we have been heavily engaged in providing professional training and assistance to enable librarians and information specialists to play their proper role in a free society as facilitators and enablers – to be, in a phrase, gate openers in societies gaining or striving to reach normality and not gatekeepers in societies controlled by secular or religious authoritarianism.

It is an obvious reality that truly democratic societies can only function properly when the breadth of the people have effective access to empirically-based knowledge and information, and to the assumptions and arguments on which the policies which govern them are based. Newspapers and the broadcasting media obviously make a subscription to such conditions of liberty - especially when their output demonstrates independence of thought, when they fully respect C P Scott's dictum that "opinion is

free, fact is sacred”, when they distinguish clearly between accurate reporting and comment, when they seek to stimulate the intelligence of their readers rather than abuse and reduce it.

But even when those requirements are fulfilled by newspapers and – more frequently and typically – by broadcasters, there is still an ingredient of freedom which they can rarely provide. It is that stock of knowledge – and the accessible diversity of sources and references - that is a library. That is why libraries in academic institutions or on the streets of communities have particular value for democratic societies and, indeed, for societies which – whilst becoming more free – have not yet reached conditions of parliamentary and judicial emancipation which characterise full liberty.

This audience will not need me to say that you people who form this Association, and your professional colleagues in the wider World, directly serve the cause of democracy by helping to ensure consistent access to its essential components – freedom of knowledge, of thought, and of expression.

I honour you for that. But because our societies and democracies need, and will always need, the enrichment of understanding, of dependable reference and record on demand, and of scholastic fulfilment and sybaritic enjoyment I hope that you receive more than tribute.

I hope that you will gain recognition from decision-makers and purse-holders that libraries are not passive knowledge stores but active assets in the efforts to make societies more informed and economically, socially and politically competent, confident, and creative. And then, I hope that the recognition is translated into sustained investment.