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**We’re on a mission. Libraries for the nation. We can do this.**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Using primary source material, contemporary accounts and personal recollection the author traces the emergence of the National Library’s confident view of itself as a library for all other Australian libraries, with a special responsibility for computer-based bibliographic control systems at the centre of national library cooperation. The paper provides brief historical context and focuses on the period 1968 to 1979, a time of unprecedented growth in library and information services - a time when the computers came.**

**1968**

Gordon Richardson (SLNSW) is President of the LAA

John Gorton takes over as Prime Minister from a vanished Harold Holt

The cost of the RAAF’s new F-111 swing-wing bomber jumps to a new estimate of $266m (current value $3b) from the original estimate of $112m. Defence minister Fairhall says the price is ‘not unreasonable’

There are violent protests against Vietnam and conscription in Sydney and Melbourne[[1]](#endnote-1)

Roy Ground’s stunning National Gallery of Victoria opens in Melbourne with a Leonard French ceiling

The *National Library Act* *1960* finally separated the Commonwealth National Library from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, but it was not until 1968, the year the new National Library building opened (with Leonard French windows on both sides of the foyer), that Sir Harold White, by now National Librarian, relinquished the position of Parliamentary Librarian to his eventual successor at the National Library, Allan Fleming.

Equipped with a new building (cost $8,614,398; present value approximately $99 million) and significant carry-over collections dating back to the mid-1930s to quickly fill it, plus a new Act granting a clear mandate for developing a national collection, with the power ‘to co-operate in library matters (including the advancement of library science) with authorities or persons, whether in Australia or elsewhere, concerned with library matters’[[2]](#endnote-2), the Library was poised for lift-off.

First, it was public libraries for the nation, but indirectly through the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS). In August 1968 AACOBS forwarded to Prime Minister Gorton a renewed submission (*Libraries for the public: a statement of needs*) on the need for Commonwealth aid for public library services. The response which came three months later was to set the financial parameters for the next decade and shape the National Library’s relationship to the governments of the day: Gorton until March 1971; then McMahon until December 1972; then Whitlam until November 1975; and Fraser until 1983. Gorton’s response:

*The establishment and maintenance of public libraries are, of course, responsibilities of the States and in the face of the Government’s increasing financial commitments and the matters to which I have referred above, I am unable to hold out hope that it will be found possible to assist directly in this area.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Undeterred, and on the other side of the Chinese wall from NLA-funded AACOBS, Sir Harold pushed on with science and technology libraries for the nation. The August 1968 report to Council[[4]](#endnote-4) contained a draft statement on the ‘urgent need for a national policy for the development of scientific and technological data services.’ He then followed up in March 1969 with a formal agreement with the US National Library of Medicine to establish the NLA as the Australian Centre for MEDLARS (Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System), appointed John Balnaves, his Principal Librarian Bibliographic Services to head a committee to study the possible uses of LC MARC tapes in Australian libraries[[5]](#endnote-5), and in a prescient move, as part of a report on fit-out and occupation of the new building[[6]](#endnote-6), identified a requirement for an additional 2,000 square feet of floor space for housing a computer facility planned for 1975.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**1969**

Ali Sharr (SLWA) is President of the LAA

One third of women aged between 15 and 49 years are now taking the contraceptive pill

Thousands march in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane in protest at the war in Vietnam

The Apollo 11 space mission lands on the moon

By the end of 1969 the National Library was off on ***its*** mission. It had already taken the high ground on acquiring major formed collections and significant individual items (including having ruffled Ifould’s feathers over the competitively-acquired *Endeavour* *Journal of Captain Cook[[8]](#endnote-8)* way back in1922) relating ‘to Australia and the Australian people’, was installed in a sparkly new building on arguably (still) the best site in Canberra, had signalled its interest in a national approach to scientific and technological information services (to find subsequent form in the STISEC report[[9]](#endnote-9)), obtained the blessing of the Commonwealth Department of Health for processing MEDLARS tapes at the Basser Computer Centre at the University of Sydney, and had AACOBS encouragement for an initial foray into national bibliographic services:

*. . . acting on the advice of the AACOBS Library Automation Committee, has requested the National Librarian, as a matter of urgency, to commence the implementation of a system capturing current A.N.B. in the MARC format as it is being prepared in the National Library, and to proceed as soon as possible thereafter with work on the conversion of retrospective A.N.B. data to machine-readable form in the MARC 2 format.[[10]](#endnote-10)*

The Library’s 1969-1970 Annual Report noted:

*The Council appreciates that at the present stage of development of library services in Australia, these are but the first steps in moving towards an adequate national service. It is anxious to secure the resources and particularly the skilled staff necessary to meet this challenging task. At the same time it appreciates the need to determine its policies and plan its services in a truly national context and to relate them to the activities of other libraries, thereby ensuring the most effective co-operative effort in the national interest.[[11]](#endnote-11)*

Ready to roll. Full steam ahead on collection building, a considered and calculating look at unclaimed territory in science and technology, and a stake in the ground and in the centre of national bibliographic services relevant to all Australian libraries – where would this train go, and how long would the head of steam last?

***1970***

Bob Hawke takes over as President of the ACTU

The Indian Pacific train makes its first east-west crossing from Sydney to Perth

70,000 people march in Melbourne in a peaceful anti-war protest organised by Jim Cairns

Tullamarine airport opens on the outskirts of Melbourne

West Gate Bridge collapses, killing 35

Victoria becomes the first state to make the wearing of seat belts compulsory

1970 was a transition year. In February Council considered in camera the appointment of the next National Librarian, to take effect on Sir Harold’s retirement in June, and asked Sir Harold to nominate an artist to paint his portrait. But it was clear that notwithstanding a change at the top, momentum was to be maintained: Council was considering ‘accepting a national responsibility for the development of substantial scientific and technological collections and resources (at present confined to a national bibliographic service)’[[12]](#endnote-12) ; Dr Robin Chivers (UNSW Dip Lib 1969) was receiving training at the National Library of Medicine in preparation for the introduction of MEDLARS; the purchase of 200 biomedical journals was approved; and Council resolved that ‘a detailed study be made of the possibility of introducing in the National Library computerised cataloguing’ [[13]](#endnote-13).

In April The Queen visited, and Arthur Ellis, who had replaced John Balnaves (who went on to establish the school of librarianship at the then Canberra College of Advanced Education), left on a three-week study tour of the UK, taking in the MARC Project at the British National Bibliography, computer production of BNB, procedures in libraries using MARC tapes in their automated library routines, the British MEDLARS service, other computerised retrieval systems in science and technology, and the National Lending Library of Science and Technology. If you’re going to be a library for the nation, then you need to be at the heart of things, and cataloguing is the heart beat of libraries. If you can’t find what you’ve collected, you might as well not have it. In a battle for status and influence, controlling cataloguing is the high ground. By the time the National Library vacated its temporary home on King’s Avenue (now demolished to make way for government offices) in August 1970, the Library was well into its mission.

In May of 1970 the Library convened a conference on its role in science and technology information services and invited Commonwealth departments and agencies to attend. And in the same month Prime Minister Gorton announced in parliament that (a somewhat surprised) Allan Fleming was to succeed White.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Fleming quickly brought his industrious no-nonsense management style to his new position. He began, typically, by clarifying the brief. He commissioned a review of Council business since 1961, concentrating on matters where action was still required. He remarked on introducing the new approach to the Council: ‘When completed, it will include all decisions which in effect establish the policy foundations of the Library’.[[15]](#endnote-15) It appeared that in determining what was yet to be done, plus whatever new initiatives were discussed as White handed over to Fleming, that the transfer of power and the transfer of tasks proceeded as smoothly as Fleming’s earlier succession to White’s position at the Parliamentary Library. Sir Harold’s legacy was in tested and safe hands.

Fleming also accepted Harrison Bryan’s invitation to become Deputy Chair of AACOBS, and thus began the enduring friendship between the two men.

AACOBS had approached the PM seeking funding for *library services to the public –* not quite the same as *funding for public library services* – in 1966 and again in 1968. Now it was decided that a third approach should be made, this time seeking a Commonwealth enquiry into public library services.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Back at the main game, Council decided to establish a research and development section to plan the introduction of new services on an ‘integrated national basis’, and also decided to engage IBM, who had sensed growing federal government interest in computing and had established in Canberra a Systems Development Institute staffed with highly personable experts whose aim was marketing as a prelude to sales. IBM was to provide consulting systems engineers to advise on creating Australian MARC records for computer production of ANB, but there was a problem:

*A delay has occurred in signing a contract for the services of IBM as a consultant to the National Library in the ANB/MARC project because the Deputy Crown Solicitor’s Office, who are acting as the National Library’s legal advisors, found the standard IBM agreement unacceptable to the Commonwealth. The main objection was to the limitation of liability for damages to a sum not exceeding the total amount paid for services.[[17]](#endnote-17)*

This liability issue, in particular the Commonwealth’s insistence on unlimited liability and the IT industry’s equally insistent position that it was not possible to insure against unlimited damages, was to dog Commonwealth contracts for decades, often pitting customer and supplier on the one hand against the Crown Solicitor on the other. Many public-private partnerships or government-business joint projects which might have hastened the introduction of new methods and systems, and broadened the skills base of librarians, simply did not happen.

**1971**

Bob Sharman (ANU) is President of the LAA

Gorton votes himself out of office and McMahon takes over

Fleming ploughed on, running with Sir Harold’s hares. The Library’s Research and Development Programme was endorsed by Council and Principal Librarian and Systems Analyst positions were created to get things rolling.[[18]](#endnote-18)

*The National Librarian described the need to develop the national bibliographic records to achieve the standards practised overseas; the National Library had a clear responsibility to improve and maintain these national services[[19]](#endnote-19)*

Then in June 1971, following Arthur Ellis’s overseas visit, Council directed that provision be made in the 1971–72 estimates ($76,000; current value $789,000) for ‘the computer production of the Australian National Bibliography, the creation of machine-readable bibliographic records for current Australian monographs and the development of the Australian MARC Record Service’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Council also authorised the National Librarian ‘to negotiate with the BNB for the BNB programs up to a cost not exceeding $33,000’ (current value $343,000) and, shock horror, granting permission for ANB to be produced in classified rather than dictionary format.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Thus began the ever-accelerating tale of computers in Australian libraries, through the introduction of MARC record processing based on an international standard for data sharing, an idea not unlike the rationale behind the World Wide Web which happened 20 years later. And for librarians, it was a development almost as significant. For systems librarians, buying someone else’s proven programs rather than developing in-house brought an early realisation of the unique features of library data processing and the slim budgets available for trail-blazing. Moving from alphabetical to Dewey sequence was a minor issue, but careful Fleming was obviously keen to have the change sanctioned by his Council.

1971 also saw the inaugural meeting of the Scientific and Technological Information Services Enquiry Committee (STISEC) with a brief to ‘Investigate the national need for scientific and technological information services in Australia, particularly from the user viewpoint’[[22]](#endnote-22); the appointment of Bob Simmons as Senior Programmer, Systems Development Section; ALP Federal Conference support for aid to public libraries included in the official platform on education; approval for conducting a joint research project with IBM’s Systems Development Institute using data from ERIC tapes[[23]](#endnote-23); early consideration of replacing the term ‘National Librarian’ with ‘Director-General’ (Fleming responding to the storm in a teacup which accompanied his appointment); Fleming, ever the administrator, proposing a statement of objectives for the Library; AACOBS tabling its first annual report – for the period 1956-70! (Fleming’s tidying hand suspected); and arrangements concluded for a visit from a senior programmer at the British National Bibliography to help the Library establish computer production of the Australian National Bibliography.

**1972**

Women’s Electoral Lobby formed in Melbourne

Aboriginal tent embassy set up in front of Parliament House in Canberra

The Snowy River Scheme officially completed

Gough Whitlam is elected. Labor is in power for the first time in 23 years. In just weeks Whitlam and deputy Lance Barnard remove the excise on Australian wine and home brew, recognise China, abolish conscription, release draft dodgers from jail, bring back the last Australian troops from Vietnam, reopen the equal pay case, take action to preserve Aboriginal land rights, reverse the previous government’s UN position on Rhodesia, and end sales tax on contraceptives

If 1970 was a transition year, 1972 was lift-off. Council approved ‘an outline plan for systems development in 1972-76 as a basis for development of more detailed planning’.[[24]](#endnote-24) Arthur Ellis and Bob Simmons’ blueprint was far-sighted (we can do this), comprehensive, grounded, and best of all, clearly expressed on a single page. The original plan is reproduced, with permission, as Appendix 1. Since it also set the parameters and built the foundations for computing in ***all*** Australian libraries henceforth, I think it is appropriate to quote selectively and in detail from the original report.

*3 Early emphasis is placed on the creation, acquisition and use of machine-readable bibliographic data bases. Phase 1 of the programme includes activities which are already being implemented or planned. These are:*

* *the development of the ANB/MARC project including the computer production of ANB*
* *the creation of the Australian MARC record service involving the addition of Australian MARC data to the MARC services of the U.S., U.K. and elsewhere*
* *the computer production of the catalogue card service for current Australian books*
* *the ERIC pilot project including the addition of Australian data (to provide an information service in educational research).*

*4 The activities included in Phase 2 are natural and logical developments aimed at:*

* *extending the coverage of the national bibliographic record in machine-readable form to include government publications, maps and films*
* *converting other national records, such as the union list of serials (SALSSAH)*
* *using existing data-bases as in a MARC based cataloguing system.*

*5 Phase 2 also includes examination of the acquisition and use of computer-based information services which would complement MEDLARS and ERIC and provide services in other areas of the social sciences.*

*8 It will be seen that the assistance of a computer service bureau is required for processing until early 1975 and for systems engineering and programming until 1973. It is assumed that planning for the selection, acquisition and installation of the Library’s own computer will begin in mid 1973 and will take some 2 years.*

*9 This first broad planning appreciation cannot be regarded as definitive or fixed. The range of activities and their associated time slots will be reviewed annually in the light of progress made, available resources and changing priorities. The forward estimates include expenditure on computer services rising from $86,000 in 1972-73 to $500,000 in 1976-77 and make provision for the staff requirements shown on the planning form.[[25]](#endnote-25)*

And so it happened. Bob’s document is far-reaching, logical and incremental. Starting from machine-readable (today we’d say ‘digital’) bibliographic records and their multiple applications, it encompasses inventory and financial control functions, then the establishment of the Library’s own computer facility, then on to ’integrated information retrieval system’, management information systems, library research, and all wrapped up in national coordination and planning. This is a grand plan, especially for its time when the techniques of systems analysis and design were just beginning to be applied, and when few librarians knew what computers could do for libraries. And yet it’s hard to imagine anything the plan left out. We can do this, indeed.

The National Library describes its core business in terms of national bibliographic control – unlikely that any other Australian library will claim this ground – but also gets an early foot in the information retrieval door with support for MEDLARS and ERIC services, foreshadows interim arrangements for using a computer service bureau (and building expertise) prior to acquiring its own computer in 1975 – and housing it in the space already allowed for. National coordination and planning is seen as a supported function from the outset – the Act allows for this, and the plan envisages a related, but unspecified research program, presumably into what the Library can do with computers. By October 1972 ‘Australia is now the third country in the world producing MARC records for its current bibliographic output and one of a very small number of countries using the computer to produce the national bibliography’.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Then there’s a flurry of overseas travel. Denis Richardson, by now Fleming’s deputy, and John Vaughan, Director of the MEDLARS service then Head of the STISEC secretariat, head off for four weeks to study developments in national information services and networks. They visit Canada’s National Science Library and consider acquiring the CAN/SDI programmes for use in Australia. Next, Janet Braithwaite, Principal Librarian Bibliographic Services, spends three weeks in the US to study cataloguing and computing developments and to work at the Library of Congress. Then Fleming has his itinerary approved for visits to Moscow, Paris, London, Washington and Ottawa. On returning he reports:

*A main element in the world scene is that the information explosion is proceeding towards international rationalisation and cooperation and international standardisation, without which efficient use of computers and communication facilities for dissemination of information is impossible. Progress is slow but visible. A country which does not want to be left out in the cold can only participate in the progress if internally it moves to coordination, rationalisation and standardisation, through a comprehensive national library and absence of a considered and coordinated information policy in the past represents no assurance that we will not suffer nationally and competitively in the international sense through its absence in the future.*

*Information has tended to be taken for granted. It is quite possible that the elements at work today could produce in 5 to 10 years a crisis in information services as significant and as relatively sudden as that which centred around environment.[[27]](#endnote-27)*

By the end of 1972 the Library has checked out its international peers, identified transplantable application software, has growing confidence in its ability to introduce new and national bibliographic systems, is running information retrieval systems (ERIC and MEDLARS), has AACOBS’ endorsement for its direction, has finalised a request for $3 million to a new and presumed favourably-disposed Whitlam government for establishing a National Scientific and Technological Information Authority, and changed its logo from a griffin to a vortex or spiral – perhaps an indication that the pace of progress had accelerated.

**1973**

Harry Bryan (U of Sydney) is President of the LAA

The Commonwealth Police raid ASIO’s headquarters in Melbourne after convincing Attorney-General Lionel Murphy they believed ASIO was withholding information concerning Croatian extremists in Australia

The Queen opens the Sydney Opera House

James Mollison buys Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* for $1.3m for the National Gallery of Australia – now valued by some at more than $100 million[[28]](#endnote-28)

Patrick White wins the Nobel Prize for literature

Onwards. Council agrees with Fleming to ‘take the initiative in preparing a national information policy statement with a view to submitting it to the Australian government for consideration’, many staff receive computer training, and George Clark, the management services director, prepares an ambitious set of budget estimates ‘to provide early advice to the Minister of the Library’s anticipated needs for a major computer installation.[[29]](#endnote-29) Note the figure for 1975–76: $14.4m (present value close to $126m) is a substantial amount of early advice. And of course it reflects the optimism of the time.

**NLA forward estimates for financial years 1972-78. Compiled in April 1973.**

| **Financial Year** | **$m** |
| --- | --- |
| 72–73 | 5.8 |
| 73–74 | 7.5 |
| 74–75 | 8.0 |
| 75–76 | 14.4 |
| 76–77 | 8.4 |
| 77–78 | 8.8 |

In short order the Library receives the CAN/SDI programmes which are to form the basis of a current awareness service based on Biological Abstracts; the ERIC Project proves so popular that participation is capped at 54 users; the STISEC Report is submitted to Cabinet and tabled in the Senate in May and the STISEC secretariat suggests that science and technology services can be provided under the existing National Library Act and decides to up the ask for funding to $3.5m for the first three years of service provision; and Bjorn Tell arrives from Sweden to advise the Library on framing a national information policy complete with 10-year implementation plan. And the Library’s staff establishment has grown from 578 in June 1970 to 707 in June 1973 - a 22 per cent increase in three years. To cap it all off, in August 1973, amendments to the National Library Act broadening the definition of ‘library materials’ to include recorded material *whether in writing or some other form,* and confirming the expanded Council’s responsibility for the development of national information services were introduced in the Senate, and received Royal Assent in December.

Then on 28 September, Fleming left. As his biographer Peter Golding sums up:

*The National Library was just short of three-quarters of a century old when Fleming left it in September 1973. His nearly three years as its chief executive had probably brought more change than by any of the four National Librarians who had preceded him and had done it in a fraction of the time they held the position. By and large it had been achieved without pain except perhaps to himself; certainly there had been no crises and the library was noticeably stronger because of his stewardship.[[30]](#endnote-30)*

In October Education Minister Beazley announced $20m (current value $186m) for primary school libraries, PA Management Consultants presented a (very) high-level plan for the development of a national information system, and the position of Director-General of the NLA was advertised in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and Sweden. In the meantime, Denis Richardson was acting DG, and although the appointment of the new DG was taking some time, everything appeared on track.

**1974**

Whitlam chooses Sir John Kerr to become Governor-General

Women achieve the full adult minimum wage

Tertiary education fees are abolished

Cyclone Tracy leaves half of Darwin’s population homeless

And then the language changed. Ken Myer, to become Council Chair in August, welcomed George Chandler, the incoming DG in April 1974, and Chandler lost no time in putting his stamp on things. The Library’s *Annual Report* for 1974–75 describes the new view from the Director-General’s office:

*The new Director-General was appointed in 1974 to advise the Government and the National Library Council on the development of networks to provide library and information services in the whole sphere of knowledge, and to encourage maximum voluntary co-operation with other organisations throughout Australia. The Director-General’s extensive nation-wide consultations with industrial, academic, professional, federal State and other organisations have identified a need to develop over 40 networks offering traditional library services, computer-based services and referral and consultancy services in each of these networks. Many offers of assistance have been received from industrial, academic, federal, State and other organisations.[[31]](#endnote-31)*

The minutes of the April Council meeting illustrate this new conceptualisation of the issues and a different search-for-a-mandate modus operandi:

*The DG tabled a draft submission to the IDC on the development of library based information services. This had been prepared in close consultation with the Acting Chairman [Myer] and with officers of the Department of the Special Minister of State who were in full agreement with the principles it expressed.*

*The DG commented that while the development programme prepared by PA Management Consultants and the Library staff provided extremely useful background information, it was considered that, at this stage, the issue most likely to come up at the IDC was the principle of whether the National Library should also have responsibility for national information services. As the term ‘national information services’ was not necessarily clear to all, he had preferred to use the term ‘library based information services’ as being more generally understood. The DG also commented that in the light of his overseas experience, information services were more economically and efficiently run within national libraries which were outward looking.*

How was this new approach going to work in the climate of library co-operation so carefully created by White and Fleming through AACOBS and through personal charm and persuasion? Chandler hurried on:

*The Director-General’s report on the development programme recommends that the National Library should now enter the second phase of normal National Library development, which is characterised by the provision of national subject libraries to meet national needs, and should establish the Australian National Scientific and Technological Library as a division of the National Library and plan for further subject libraries or services in the social sciences and humanities.[[32]](#endnote-32)*

Where did this come from? What was the first phase and when and why did it end? Did Liverpool have national subject libraries? Was it now ***subject*** libraries for the nation?

Then ALBIS emerged. The IDC on National Information Services appointed a working party in response to Chandler’s extended draft of the NLA submission. Chandler then puts to Council that ‘ . . . the report of the IDC on the development of an Australian library-based information system [ALBIS] be received and its recommendations endorsed.’[[33]](#endnote-33) And just to clarify that there was to be a single line of thought on this matter: ‘The services of PA Management Consultants could not be continued on the terms proposed by them which arose from the Library’s difficulties in establishing an ALBIS Project Team to work with the consultants.’[[34]](#endnote-34)

Down in the engine room Arthur Ellis and Bob Simmons were focused on the plan. Council endorsed their submission on computing requirements: ‘the Minister’s approval be sought to enter into an annual contract to rent an IBM System 3 Model 15 computer for in-house data processing as an adjunct to continued use of outside service bureaux, at an initial capital charge of $9,473, (Current value: $70,647) and an annual rental, when fully operational, of $53,808.’[[35]](#endnote-35) (Current value: $401,286) And Bob was already thinking about getting on with the tasks he identified on Planning Form 1: ‘With other Australian libraries gaining access to computer facilities, the National Library is examining the long-term possibility of establishing a network to facilitate the interchange of bibliographic and other data to streamline the processing of information requests.’[[36]](#endnote-36)

**1975**

Laurie Brown (SLTas) is President of the LAA

Family Law Court established. Parliament votes in favour of making 12 months’ separation the sole grounds for divorce.

Medibank starts

Kerr sacks Whitlam, dissolves Parliament and appoints Fraser interim PM; Fraser romps into office at the subsequent election

Chandler had been thinking about establishing an advisory committee for ‘State and Municipal libraries’ since October 1974 and in January 1975 Council approved the membership of an Advisory Committee for ‘State and Public Libraries’ which included Myer as Chairman, Senator Davidson, Justice Else-Mitchell (representing the Canberra Public Library Service), Council and departmental representatives and Chandler himself. A very senior gathering, and with a brief to ‘(a) examine the submissions from State and public libraries to ALBIS and (b) to consider the organisation of the networks necessary for State and public libraries.’[[37]](#endnote-37)

The computer issue was bubbling along as well. In April 1975 Council approved ‘the rental of an IBM System 370/145 computer at an initial cost in 1975/76 of approximately $250,000 [Current value: $1.7m] for site preparation and importation cost recovery, together with a monthly rental of approximately $47,000 [Current value: $325,000].[[38]](#endnote-38)

In March 1975 PM Whitlam had set up a Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries, chaired by Allan Horton and due to report by December 1975[[39]](#endnote-39). Chandler, now with his own advisory committee in the same area, was keen to ensure that nothing Horton’s inquiry did would compromise the NLA’s ALBIS mission:

*Council stressed the importance of making a detailed submission to the Committee of Enquiry into Public Libraries which would define the status of the Library as an independent statutory authority. The role of the Library in the national context is to be emphasised by indicating that it is central to the nation’s library based information services, and, that it has the managerial responsibility for ALBIS.[[40]](#endnote-40)*

and

*Council noted that the 15th Annual Report of the Council of the National Library of Australia should clearly indicate the powers of the Library Council and that it should stress that the Library has been entrusted with the development of library based information services[[41]](#endnote-41).*

The Horton Committee had as one of its terms of reference ‘the relationship between proposed public library policies and the Australian Library Based Information System feasibility studies’ and wrote to the Director-General seeking:

1. *information on policy matters relating to State, municipal and regional libraries;*
2. *a report on progress with ALBIS.*

Chandler wrote back, taking the high ground:

*The National Library Council’s policy is to execute whatever role is allocated to it by the Australian Government to encourage State, regional and municipal libraries to become part of a national library system involving their participation in the following functions:*

1. *as contributors to the national resources of library materials held by administratively and geographically separate organisations able and willing to make them available to the Australian community as a whole;*
2. *as access points to the national resources of library materials;*
3. *as potential service points for specific computer based services; and*
4. *as potential access points to a possible national computer based system linking all computer based services*.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Nothing much on governance arrangements. Just ‘Here’s what we’re doing, and this is how you’ll fit in.’ And sure enough, in October, Chandler was taken to task by AACOBS and by the LAA for not consulting widely on his plans for ALBIS.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Chandler responded by ratcheting up the rhetoric: ‘The Council met in Committee and considered its policies. It agreed to adhere to the concept of not only developing a great collection of library materials in the National Library but also national subject libraries, national lending library services and resource-sharing networks in the framework of UNISIST [World Science Information System], NATIS[National Information Systems] and ALBIS.’ The DG reported to Council that ‘The Minister approved provision of $250,000 in the National Library estimates for 1975–76 for inter-library cooperation which was subsequently reduced to budgetary provision of $75,000. However, the Minister agreed to consider recommending to Cabinet the increase of the allocation for inter-library cooperation to $1 million when the ALBIS report is presented to Cabinet in December, 1975.’ Council decided to amend this wording by replacing ‘when the ALBIS report is presented to Cabinet in December 1975’ with ‘when the report of the Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries is submitted to Cabinet’, and to broaden the term ‘inter-library cooperation’ to ‘inter-library cooperation for the development of resource-sharing networks in the framework of UNISIST, NATIS and ALBIS’.[[44]](#endnote-44) If there was money around, Chandler wanted it, even if it came through the work of the Horton Committee.

But of course the money didn’t come until much later in the 80s.[[45]](#endnote-45) Instead Kerr dismissed Whitlam, Fraser was elected, fiscal restraint followed and many of the big schemes encouraged by the Whitlam government were casualties of the transition. Senator Reg Withers (Senate Whip and known as ‘The Toecutter’ for his strong views on party loyalty) became the Library’s Minister and advised the Library that a healthy economy was needed before new projects could be funded. By February 1976 it was all over for ALBIS, for the Horton Committee and for the NLA’s Advisory Committee on State and Public Libraries.

**1976**

First Vietnamese boat people arrive in Australia

Victoria begins random breath testing for motorists

Blue Hills, Australia’s longest running radio serial ends after 27 years on the ABC

Cigarette and tobacco advertising banned from radio and TV

In June 1976 Chandler reported to Council a possible $3 million budget reduction, and staffing reduced to 720. The Minister insisted that there were no Commonwealth funds for new functions. The Library went back to its knitting: ‘Council reaffirms the existing high priority of the National Shared Cataloguing System (BIBDATA) as a national project and instructs the Director-General to continue to give high priority to this project.’[[46]](#endnote-46)

But there were stirrings on the information retrieval front. Brian Southwell from Monash University had been talking with Tony Klingender from ACI Computer Services about continuing the Online ERIC Project when the National Library’s trial came to an end. ACI was already running a national computer network to support its diversified glass and building products manufacturing businesses and had recently been granted permission by the ACI Board to seek new customers outside ACI Group companies. It was a tempting offer. At this time only the Commonwealth Bank, perhaps a couple of insurance companies and no doubt some parts of Defence[[47]](#endnote-47) had set up expensive leased line national networks. Such an undertaking was certainly beyond the National Library’s budget at the time.

**1977**

Margaret Trask (UNSW) is President of the LAA

83 people die in Granville rail disaster as train hits bridge and derails

To cut costs, most federal public servants to fly economy class on overseas trips

Sir John Kerr resigns as Governor-General

And the outlook wasn’t bright back at base. Government guidelines for the 1977–78 financial year urged expenditure restraint, leaving Council with no option other than deferring a submission for a large computer.[[48]](#endnote-48) The forward estimates for 1977/8 and 1978/9 were reduced from the original amount sought and contained ‘no provision for staff for any new network or service’.[[49]](#endnote-49)

So the Library did what it could. Council approved proposals to negotiate with ACI ‘for its participation in an on-line network for a range of data bases in the social sciences and in science and technology’, and in February 1977, representatives from major Australian libraries met at the NLA to consider a proposal from ACI which was to give birth to AUSINET – Australia’s first multi-disciplinary information retrieval network, and ironically, an Australian Library Based Information Service . . . In June 1977 the Library held a meeting to finalise participation in AUSINET. Opting in, in principle, were the NLA, Monash University, the University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, the University of Sydney, the State Library of Tasmania, the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education, the Curriculum Development Centre, the Australian National University, the WA institute of Technology and the University of Adelaide. The Australian Road Research board and Murdoch University joined shortly after, followed by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, the Queensland Institute of Technology, Queensland University and Deakin University. This select group could see the future, and were prepared to invest to make it happen.

Meanwhile, Bob Love, former MEDLARS support programmer from the Department of Health and now Bob Simmons’ right hand man had been overseas in an unsuccessful search for software on which to base a national shared cataloguing network. Then Chandler announced that the British Library’s BLAISE system (British Library Automated Information Service) met all the objectives of BIBDATA and could be mounted on the Library’s existing mainframe computer. A one-year ‘operational evaluation’ was scheduled.[[50]](#endnote-50)

**1978**

John Balnaves (Canberra College of Advanced Education) is President of the LAA

SBS broadcasting service is established

Government accepts Indonesian takeover of East Timor

Parliament approves construction of new Parliament House to be completed by the bi-centenary in 1988

Bomb explodes in a rubbish hopper outside the Sydney Hilton during a Commonwealth Heads of Government regional meeting (Fleming is head of the Protective Services Coordination Centre in charge of security)

But BLAISE didn’t cut the mustard and the US Washington Library Network (WLN) software became the preferred candidate. It was successfully evaluated in 1979 and went into production the following year.

**1979**

John Brudenall (Commonwealth Parliamentary Library) is President of the LAA

Sydney’s eastern suburbs railway, originally planned in the 1870s, is opened

A total of 48 small boats carrying 1,910 Indo-Chinese refugees has arrived since January 1976

PM Fraser says a moratorium on the drilling of oil on the Great Barrier Reef will continue indefinitely

More than 20 per cent of teenagers are out of work as the number of jobless hits a post-war high of 451,500 in December

The Full Bench of the Arbitration Commission grants 52 weeks unpaid maternity leave for all women in private industry

Rupert Murdoch takes over Ansett Transport Industries

Then in November 1979, the spirit of the Horton Report, originally tabled in April 1976, stirred, if only to be re-interred. The Minister, Bob Ellicott, released a policy statement on assistance to public libraries:

*The Government has recently given consideration to the report of the Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries (the Horton report). As a result of that consideration the Government has decided to initiate a review of the current level of library resources and facilities to identify the development that has taken place in each since 1976. An interdepartmental working group has been established to undertake the review . . . I believe that the findings of the Working Group on the matters which have been referred to it for examination will provide a useful basis on which the Government can take an appropriate decision in the field of assistance to public libraries.[[51]](#endnote-51)*

By this time Chandler had noticed the writing on the wall and his grand plans for libraries and networks had shrunk to positioning the Library at the centre of national bibliographic systems and leaving information retrieval systems largely to the private sector. He had obtained a recommendation from Council’s Advisory Committee for Cooperation with State and Public Libraries that the Library should give priority to the WLN system, plus a recommendation to the Prime Minister from the Bland Administrative Review Committee that the Library should give priority to feasibility studies for a national on-line shared cataloguing system and in so doing appeared to have convinced the government that additional resources (nine additional positions) for BIBDATA could be construed as assistance to public libraries.

In the same November statement the Minister commented:

*The Director-General of the National Library has recently advised me that the Library has now selected, and plans to introduce, a system that will improve the cost-effectiveness of its existing operations and services. This system will also be capable of providing a nation-wide on-line shared cataloguing service . . . The National Library has been a catalyst in the development of a range of services to public libraries.[[52]](#endnote-52)*

Indeed it had. Ken Myer, who had been either member or Chair of the National Library Council for the entire period considered in this paper, had witnessed White’s then Fleming’s careful construction of a library for the nation. But by the late 70s ‘We can do this’ had become ‘We’ll do what we can’. The imported concept of great subject libraries foundered on the same rocks as federal funding for public libraries: if no will can be found in the government of the day, then major initiatives are unlikely to be funded. As always, the task is persuasion to see things the way the Library sees them. But computing survived, even flourished, especially when we look back from today. Bob Simmons’ plan might not have happened at the pace predicted, and the change agent might not always have been the National Library, but establishing the technology base for subsequent print and digital resource sharing continues to pay dividends for all Australian libraries.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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APPENDIX 1

*A first broad study of the Library’s activities in systems development over the next 5 years has been prepared as a starting point for more thorough development, both of specific areas and of the general programme. The results of this study are set out in tabular form in Appendix 1*. (Council Report 884, April 1972)

Activities and Tasks - Year 1972 - Year 1973 - Year 1974 - Year 1975 - Year 1976. Creation, Aquisition & Utilization of machine readable bibliographic databases. 
Phase 1: ANB/MARC
MARC Record Service
Catalogue card production
ERIC pilot project
Pahse 2: MARC-Based cataloguing
Australian maps, films,
retrospective national
bibliography, Salssah etc
Serials Control
ordering & Accounting
inventor
establishment of National Library Data Processing Centre 
conversion of existingADP systems to new equipment
development of integrated
information-retrieval system management information services
Library research National coordination and planning
educational lectures planning
Microform study

Staff Loadings
system development officers
system librarians
analyst/programmers
support staff
service general assistance

1. The lists of significant events are taken from: Ross, John (ed.) *Chronicle of Australia; the complete story of our nation*. Penguin Books Australia, Melbourne, 2000. Dates for LAA and then ALIA Presidents are taken from the ALIA website. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. National Library Act 1960, Part II, Section 6, Functions of Library http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2011C00245 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. NLA Council Report 495, August 1968 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. NLA Council Report 497, August 1968 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. NLA Council Report 524, March 1969 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. NLA Council Report 531, August 1969 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Golding, Peter, *An unqualified success: the extraordinary life of Allan Percy Fleming*. Sydney, Rosenberg Publishing, 2013. Pp.189-90. Ifould, NSW State Librarian, was in London to bid at auction for the Journal when he received instructions from Prime Minister Bruce to bid, not for the State Library, but for the Commonwealth. Deputy National Librarian Binns had been hard at work convincing the government that an item of national significance should be housed in the nation’s library. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. National Library of Australia. *The STISEC report; report to the Council of the National Library of Australia by the Scientific and Technological Information Services Enquiry Committee*, May 1973. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. NLA Council Report 575, August 1969. ANB is *Australian National Bibliography*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. National Library of Australia. *10th Annual Report 1969-1970*, p.2 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. NLA Council Report 592, February 1970 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. NLA Council Report 602, March 1970 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Golding, op cit. p.216 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. NLA Council Report 657, August 1970 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. NLA Council Report 693, December 1970 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. NLA Council Report 696, December 1970 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. NLA Council Report 697, December 1970 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. NLA Council Report 709, February 1971 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. NLA Council Report 742, June 1971 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. NLA Council Report 759, June 1971 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. National Library of Australia. *11th Annual Report 1970-1971*, p.19 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The US National Institute of Education, Education Resources information Center produced indexes and abstracts of journals and reports in the education field, and distributed them on magnetic tape. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. NLA Council Report 884, April 1972 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. NLA Council Report 958, October 1972 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. NLA Council Report 974, December 1972 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Grishin, Sasha. *A legacy worth protecting*. Canberra Times, Panorama, 25th October 2014, p.12 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. NLA Council Report 1025, April 1973 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Golding, Peter, p.264 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. National Library of Australia. *15th Annual Report 1974-1975*, p.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. NLA Council Report 1230, April 1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. NLA Council Report 1231, June 1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. NLA Council Report 1294, October 1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. NLA Council Resolution 165/74/1295, October 1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. NLA Council Report 1295, October 1974 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. NLA Council Resolution 13/75/1370, January 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. NLA Council Resolution 77/75/1410, April 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries. *Report:* *Public libraries in Australia*. Canberra, AGPS, 1976 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. NLA Council Report 1440, June 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. NLA Council Report 1443, June 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. NLA Council Report 1440, June 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. NLA Council Report 1511, October 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. NLA Council Report 1546, December 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. The introduction to the Library’s *23rd Annual Report 1982-1983* begins with the sentence: ‘A year which began under the most favourable auspices for perhaps a decade saw very considerable progress made in the services which the Library provides to the nation’ and goes on to mention a 20 per cent increase in funds available for the purchase of library materials and a 1.2 per cent increase (7 EFT0 in the staff ceiling. p.v. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. NLA Council Resolution 140/76/1684, October 1976 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Golding, Peter. *An unqualified success, 2013*. p.241. Golding mentions Fleming’s involvement in the purchase of a computer for the Defence Department, possibly the first in the Commonwealth public service, early in the 1950s. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. NLA Council Resolution 10/77/1752, February 1977 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. NLA Council Report 1771, April 1977 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. NLA Council Report 1847, October 1977 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. NLA Council Report 2120, December 1979 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)