

Preface

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This report presents the proceedings of a one-day public seminar held at the London School of Economics on 23 October 1999 on the subject: 'Do Public Libraries have a Future'. This was organised by the Camden Public Libraries Users Group to promote informed public debate on library issues in the context of the London borough of Camden's 'Public Consultation' on its 'Best Value' proposals to close three of its thirteen local libraries and reduce further overall opening hours. Camden's plans were, of course, vigorously opposed by library users in a long-running campaign which took us to the brink of seeking a judicial review. This was only averted when Camden's councillors, by a narrow majority involving unprecedented cross-party manoeuvring, belatedly and reluctantly agreed to hold a public consultation, chaired by Tony Travers. This concluded on January 2000 with the recommendation that the minor budget savings required (£200,000) should be met in other ways, without closing libraries or further reducing library core services.

Since we believe that, through the contributions of the main speakers and the discussions they provoked, our LSE Seminar played some role in this result, we think it may be useful for other library users faced with similar problems to have access to our findings.

We started from our experience that many planners and politicians, unfortunately, tend to evaluate library performance in rather simplistic accounting terms without regard to the fundamental social, cultural, educational and even psychological functions which a little careful observation shows libraries perform. Our seminar was designed to highlight some of these crucial realities which should underlie library provision. By making available some of the most recent in-depth--as opposed to more superficial opinion survey--research findings, our invited speakers--who are all well-known specialists on their subjects--challenged the prevalent myths, opinions, platitudes, and questionable statistics which, alas, are so often used by politicians and their official advisers in this debate.

We were, of course, aware of fairly widely held conspiracy theories according to which those who formulate library policy are often believed to be primarily motivated by personal ambition--to say nothing of other interests--to build huge 'super libraries' by selling off valuable property housing smaller, more locally accessible local libraries. We were also aware of the astonishing American achievement in San Francisco of building a brand new library which is an architectural wonder, but unable to contain anything like its anticipated capacity of books. Indeed, it is reported to have had to hurriedly get rid of 200,000 books which the previous building held. People go there to admire the building not to read the books! Although such adventures were perhaps a little outside Camden's budget, CPLUG had seen enough not to totally discount such sceptical assessments of so-called 'best value' projects.

For the purposes of our seminar, however, we largely ignored these extraneous motives to focus our attention on how library development plans might take account of relevant evidence on what libraries actually mean to those who use them. Neglect of such basic information, it has to be said, is by no means confined to library planners and those they advise. As an academic social anthropologist I have seen a large number of so-called 'development projects' in the Third World. In assessing these from time to time, I have found that a depressing proportion of 'developers' are not really interested in trying to understand the local context, or what those who are supposed to benefit from development really want. Developers' interests all too often lie elsewhere--where the money is, and attractive prospects for promotion lie. Often indeed, it seems that the last thing that planners and developers actually want to know is local opinion and local aspirations. It is easy to see why this should be so: the more you know about a problem, the more complicated it seems and the more your actions are constrained by this knowledge--if you treat it seriously.

The material presented here is essentially in the form that it was offered to the seminar: as will be seen, some speakers relied heavily on diagrams and projections, others followed a more traditional pattern of oral discourse, and I am grateful to all the participants for sending me copies of their presentations. This record does not include the lively contributions made by so many people in the audience; nor does it include the exceptionally stimulating and witty presentation made by Jim Agnew, head of Community Services in Surrey. This was delivered off-the-cuff and contained such memorable references as that to council officials who sought career advancement on a basis of 'managing change' (however inappropriate), and to situations where politicians blundered onto a particularly sensitive public nerve and then went on a jumping on it. This, Mr Agnew observed, was not 'smart politics'. Although I regret we do not have Mr Agnew's own notes, at least those who attended the seminar have a particularly vivid memory of his wise remarks which many in the audience described as 'inspirational'.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the wonderful support we received from our seminar speakers and discussion chairmen--most of whom had no previous connexions with CPLUG, but nevertheless readily responded to invitations to participate. We have also been very lucky in finding informed people who helped us mere library users to select topics (far from complete, of course) for discussion and identify appropriate speakers. I am particularly grateful to Frances Hendrix of LASER who, although she could not come herself, pointed us toward Robin Yates and many others. Equal thanks are due to Jean Sykes, chief librarian and head of IT at the LSE, and to Barry Bloomfield, formerly of the British Library. I would also like to acknowledge the support of our two local papers--the Camden New Journal, and the Ham and High--as well as to the Evening Standard who, in their different ways all helped to publicise the event. I should also thank the LSE, from which I retired a few years ago, but whose public functions letting department nevertheless charged us a reduced fee.

Finally, it has to be recorded that this seminar would never have been successfully staged without the vital input of Clair Drew, Secretary of CPLUG, and from other officers as well as from Anne Lewis who, up to the last moment, worked hard to publicise the event. We hope that, although lacking the ensuing discussion (to some extent captured in Robin Yates' paper), concerned library users may find something of

value in these pages. Certainly, the problem of how to finance the locally accessible library services which the public wants--and expects--seems likely to continue to be a significant issue in local and national politics for a long time to come.

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