



Opening Address by IFLA President

Ingrid Parent

Libraries – A Force for Change: Inspiring, Surprising, Empowering

Session:

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Dear Colleagues:

As President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, it gives me great pleasure to add my own words of welcome to our 78th Annual General Conference and Assembly—here in the beautiful and historic city of Helsinki.

We are so very grateful that our Finnish Colleagues have agreed to be our hosts for this year's Conference.

Finland's wonderful support of its own library system¹—and its determination to make library content freely accessible to all citizens throughout the nation—makes this venue especially appropriate for our gathering this week. That such an enlightened philosophy is enshrined in government policy speaks volumes about the determination of the Finnish people to make libraries an essential cornerstone of their democracy.

For my part, I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks and congratulations to all our IFLA colleagues on the National Committee who have worked so hard to make this conference a reality. It takes a tremendous amount of hard work, dedication and passion to bring a convention such as this to fruition.

On a more personal note I would like to acknowledge two special people in the audience today. One is Dr. David Farrar, the Provost and Vice President Academic of my home institution, the University of British Columbia. I am delighted he has joined us at our conference to witness firsthand the important work of IFLA and of libraries around the world. Through Dave I would like to express my appreciation to the University for allowing me time away from my own responsibilities as the University Librarian - so that I might carry out my duties as IFLA President. As you can imagine it is a real balancing act filling both jobs, and I am very grateful that UBC is making it just that much easier to accomplish.

And finally, I want to acknowledge my husband, Marc Parent, who is also in the audience. It is not often that one has the opportunity to thank – and perhaps embarrass a spouse - in front of a few thousand people, but I would like to do that now. He has been incredibly patient with my frequent absences from the home front. So thank you Marc. And cheer up; we are half way through my Presidency so you will be seeing a lot more of me—sooner than you think!

I have titled my remarks today *Libraries – A Force for Change: Inspiring... Surprising...Empowering*. The title is, of course, a combination of my Presidential Theme and the theme of this conference. Over the next few days I am sure you will come to see how appropriate that combination truly is.

My Presidential Theme - Libraries – A Force for Change encompasses the principles:

- Of inclusion, where we are in a unique position to be at the center of the democratization of access to information, to all people - regardless of ethnic origin, religion, age, or language;
- Of transformation, where we can literally change lives by being centres not just for individual research, study, and the simple joy of reading, but also by being gathering places that encourage social interaction and dialogue among citizens and neighbours;
- Of innovation where we pursue creative ways of enhancing our users' experiences; and finally
- Of convergence of resources and initiatives to unite us across information professions.

Putting these principles into practice will be critical to making libraries a true force for change, for positive change, over the next several years.

One of the best things about being IFLA President is the opportunity to meet with a wonderful international community of librarians and the associations they represent. And I have seen how Inspiring, Surprising, and Empowering libraries can be.

It was not hard to be inspired last September when I spoke at a conference in Tunisia whose theme² dealt with the critical role reading plays in society. There were 110 participants from many countries representing North Africa, North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. It was fascinating to hear the different perspectives on how reading can help communities bridge generations – across age, gender and culture.

But of course, given this venue, there was something else at play here that you couldn't avoid. Tunisia, you will recall, was the first nation in the region to overthrow a repressive government - during the so-called Arab Spring. While I was there talking to young people—and those not so young—it was so evident that they have this great thirst for knowledge and a strong desire to access every bit of information that they could. And they are increasingly turning to libraries to provide that information.

A month later, I was in Maribor, Slovenia, for the Biannual Conference of the Slovenian Library Association where I spoke about the changing role of the librarian and the special power that libraries have to make a difference in peoples' lives. I was struck by the

fundamental and provocative questions that conference participants raised about libraries as spaces for dialogue and knowledge. About the evolving position of libraries in society. About the changing roles of librarians. About new and different interactions with our users in the digital age. And how the answers to such questions might lead us to some conclusions about the role of the contemporary library in the 21st century.

Nor was it hard to be delightfully surprised in Spain last December to witness the incredible pride of the Spanish people as they celebrated the 300th Anniversary of their National Library. The joy the people took in their national treasure, so steeped in culture and history, was absolutely infectious.

The opening of a fantastic exhibit launched a whole year of events. The King and Queen of Spain attended, and they were very interested and impressed by the collection of the National Library, a heritage that must be protected as well as made accessible to all. The media covered the events in great detail and raised the profile of the National Library and all libraries in Spain.

Closer to home in Canada, I attended the '*Congrès des milieux documentaires du Québec*' where I was joined by two distinguished IFLA colleagues³, to outline the special role that IFLA, as an international association, plays in supporting libraries. This annual conference brings together several library, archival and other information associations into one major event that attracts over a thousand participants. They were extremely gracious to me as IFLA president, even to the extent of holding an event in my honour.

I participated in similarly productive and well-attended meetings with my colleagues in library associations in other parts of Canada, in Ontario, British Columbia as well as at our national association annual conference. Like Finland, library use in Canada is very high, and like our Finnish counterparts, Canadian libraries are leaders in the development of innovative practices. One such example in my country has been the creative repurposing of physical space—developing flexible areas to meet a wide range of user needs, from individual study to group collaboration. In all my meetings with Canadian librarians, they invariably expressed a keen interest in the work of IFLA and in exploring what is possible on the international stage.

One of my proudest moments took place in April at my first Presidential Meeting held in Vancouver. It was incredibly moving to witness the empowerment experienced by all the participants at this international gathering on the topic of Indigenous Knowledge: local priorities, global contexts. It was an amazingly informative and heartfelt two days of discussion with indigenous speakers from Canada, Finland, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia.

We came together to share our perspectives on the organization, ownership, and stewardship of traditional knowledge and information.

But it was much more than that. Throughout the meeting speakers acknowledged some of the more painful and tragic elements of the history between indigenous and non-indigenous citizens of many nations. Painful elements that have had a direct and harmful impact on indigenous cultures. But participants also looked hopefully toward the future, and provided examples of new approaches to gathering and disseminating information that are respectful of indigenous traditions, yet as open as possible to others.

As you might imagine the event went far beyond the mere sharing of information. As first nations and aboriginal representatives shared their perspectives in word and song, in their native languages, you couldn't help but be moved, sometimes almost to tears, even without understanding their languages.

One of the participants was Tuija Guttorm, the Librarian of the Saami Cultural Centre in Inari, Finland. She spoke movingly of the Crossing Library project in her community that seeks to introduce the Saami culture and literature to the people of her community. It was especially heartening to hear her say—at the end of the conference—that when she heard the singing, she realized she wasn't alone and that she had brothers and sisters everywhere.

Perhaps most gratifying of all was to hear Grand Chief Ed John, who among his distinguished titles is the North American Representative to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. He commended IFLA for convening such a session to listen to indigenous peoples' perspectives and asked us to continue this very valuable work.

April also saw the inauguration of the World Book Capital for 2012 in Yerevan, Armenia. IFLA is a member of the jury that selects the World Book Capital, and I was invited to attend and say a few words. The handover ceremony was very impressive and attended by the top political and religious figures in the country – as well as by – it seemed – all the residents of the city. And it was very evident, that everyone, young and old alike, took tremendous pride in their city being named World Book Capital. What struck me was how very important they see books and language to be—to preserving and promoting Armenian culture and identity.

These are but a few examples of what I have witnessed in libraries all over the world being inspiring, sometimes surprising and invariably empowering.

It is easy to see why they hold such a special power for their citizens. They are a safe place for the discovery, exploration and exchange of ideas.

Perhaps most important of all they contain the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of all generations. As repositories of history, culture, heritage and identity, they provide their citizens with a sense of their past, their place in the present and hopes for their future.

Now of course, I don't mean to suggest that everything with libraries is perfect. Struggling economies and constantly changing information and communications technology continue to have a direct and often stressful impact on library operations the world over.

So the question is how does IFLA as an organization best respond internationally on your behalf to these realities, and how do your libraries and your library associations do the same in your own countries? The emerging digital world has shown that all libraries are affected by international developments, whether they be political, economic or social.

I have often said that we should take a cue from the environmentalist credo of thinking globally, but acting locally. Of course, in the case of libraries and our allied institutions we must do both. Which is to say we must think AND act—both globally and locally.

IFLA advocates on your behalf on the international stage. The benefits of this role flow through to your national and regional library associations, to help you determine your own courses of action.

Such advocacy includes the critical work we are doing in encouraging member states of the World Intellectual Property Organization or WIPO to adopt a copyright limitations and exceptions legal instrument for libraries and archives. A legal certainty that will allow them to continue to preserve their collections, support education and research, and lend electronic materials.

The ongoing viability of libraries as trusted intermediaries between creators and users in the 21st century is dependent on balanced and forward looking copyright legislation, both at the national and the international levels.

To that end IFLA has sent representatives to two meetings of WIPO's Standing Committee on Copyright and Related Rights over the past year.

Last November, several CLM colleagues and I were in Geneva for a meeting of the Standing Committee. IFLA's observer status allowed us to briefly make our case in front of the entire Standing Committee. I was very impressed to see that the over 180 member countries took three whole days to discuss the merits of copyright limitations and exceptions for libraries and archives, and that was only the start.

When the Standing Committee reconvened in July, although libraries and archives did not command a large part of their agenda, the committee did formally adopt a working document to which IFLA had input as the basis for future discussion. Copyright limitations and exceptions for libraries will continue to be part of WIPO's deliberations and IFLA will continue to be present to promote the values that we hold paramount to best serve our users.

But whether we are talking about copyright limitations and exceptions or issues of Open Access, or Information Literacy, or Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, or the dozens of other concerns we tackle on the international stage - we would have great difficulty in accomplishing our work - or otherwise function – without the active participation of our national and institutional members.

Ours is truly an interdependent relationship. Working together, our voices become stronger and increase the likelihood of having our viewpoints heard. Our joint efforts are absolutely critical for ensuring that the library perspective is part of the public policy debate. In so doing we can reframe the conversation, and place issues of importance for libraries on the agenda, both nationally and internationally.

And of course this is what this conference is all about. Our mutual support and sharing of ideas. I truly believe that all of you have the power to make your library associations and your libraries a force for change in the years ahead.

Over the next few days I know you will be sharing some very innovative ideas for the promotion of the value of libraries in your own communities. If you need inspiring ideas to take home with you, I point to the Cycling for Libraries event that took place between July 28 and August 7th. Covering a course of about 600 km, through Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia bicyclists visited libraries and met with local library colleagues. I thought the description on its website is very apt for our deliberations. It says:

“Many values inherited from librarianship are present here: openness, liberalism, access to information, lifelong learning and innovativeness. Librarianship is also by its very nature humanist, internationalist, cross-boundary and hands-on.”

Your own Pekka Heikkinen participated and noted that one day the tour met the Latvian minister of culture who joined at least for a mile of the ride and that the event was a news topic on TV. I also understand that Pekka has suggested a new event "Eating for Libraries". Now that sounds like a fine innovative idea. Eat for libraries and gain a lot of weight, and then cycle for libraries to lose it!

My greatest wish for this conference is for you to leave energized and excited about possibilities. Collectively and individually you make a tremendous difference in peoples' lives. In ways that most often you will never know. After all, libraries are, or can be, community destinations. As centres of learning, as centres of community activity and action, as centres of inclusion and democratic values.

I also believe that conferences like this have a life that goes on long after they are over. They are a call to action. We have more power to influence more people than just about any other public institution.

We should use that power wisely. But we should use it.

Thank you very much.

Ingrid Parent

IFLA President, 2011-2013

¹Ministry of Education and Culture - Library policy. In Finland the guiding principle in public libraries is to offer free access to cultural and information sources for all irrespective of their place of residence and financial standing. The use of library collections at the library and borrowing are free of charge.

²*"Reading is a link between generations: Toward a more interdependent society."*

³Suzanne Payette and Claude Bonnelly.