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Librarians and politicians behind the same wheel

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Introduction

First of all I want to thank the MLA Section for highlighting the theme of libraries and politics by arranging this workshop. For me as a politician as well as president of The Danish Library Association it has been an interesting but also somewhat frustrating experience to see how little importance IFLA and for that matter the European library association, EBLIDA, attaches to the political aspects of being international library associations.

As I see it – and I may be wrong – this is my second IFLA conference – IFLA is a very qualified meeting place for professional development and networking, but in my book that is not sufficient.

In my opinion a much more proactive and political approach to the issues is necessary, if IFLA should be able to play its part as an international civil organization working for the global cause of securing libraries as the basis of a democratic society. Therefore the discussion on The Green Light Paper this winter was so important, because this was a first conscious step in the right direction, changing IFLA from a wonderful conference maker to a powerful global player. And part of that role is to organize and inspire the national library associations to in their turn make the national back up on global issues as for example the preparatory work on The World Summit on The Information Society (WSIS).

Why bring Libraries and National Library Associations into the Political Sphere?

But is it really necessary for the national and the international library associations to play a political role, and what do I mean by insisting on the necessity of bringing the associations into the political sphere?

Well, it will be of no surprise to you that I as politician think that it is necessary to work politically, if you want to achieve public recognition and consequently the necessary financial support to run updated, qualified libraries.

From my national experience I know that it has been quite difficult for most professional groups to understand that in a modern, democratic society it is not sufficient to have a mutual professional agreement on the importance of what you are doing.

To gain broader understanding it is necessary to make your cause understood and accepted by the decision makers and by the public. In order to get your fair share of the cake you must be able to convince the politicians that your cause is at least as important as all the other good causes.

Therefore library associations as well as all other professional groupings need to be outgoing and aware of the political mechanism.

And that bring me to the second part of my question: what do I mean by being political? Should the library associations play an active role in the current political debate, nationally and internationally? Yes, I think so, as long as the debate is about library issues and issues of the values underlying the library system, such as free access to information and freedom of expression.

But in addition the library associations must see themselves as lobby organizations and learn how to work as professional lobbyists – also at the national level.

How to bring Library Associations into the Political Sphere?

That may all be correct, but how do we bring the library associations into the political sphere? Is it at all possible to make the politicians interested in library matters?

Well, standing here to day as a politician I am a proof that it is possible!

There are many ways of achieving this more political approach.

I will give you some examples of how it may be done.

The Danish Library Association

One example is the way chosen by my own association, The Danish Library Association.

We have a quite radical solution, which is to bring the politicians and the librarians together in the same association.

The Danish Library Association has a long history of cooperation between librarians and politicians. I don't want to bore you with a long history lesson, but just mention that one of the likely reasons for this tradition is that Denmark got its first Library Act in 1920.

When you have a library legislation, which needs regular revision, the professionals have to establish contacts in the political system. And as the Danish public libraries gradually developed from state grants to local municipality grants, links to the local politicians became a necessity.

This reflects into the structure of the Danish Library Association where the president since 1962 has been an active politician and from the late 70'ies a local politician.

Does that mean that the librarians have no role to play in the library association? By no means.

On the contrary it means that a very close cooperation has developed between the local cultural politicians and their library managers through the mutual work in the library association on the same cause: the development of the Danish library system.

The structure

But it requires a quite complicated organizational structure of the library association in order to secure that both groups have a say.

Consequently The Danish Library Association consists of two sections: the politicians and the library professionals, library institutions and cultural organizations.

Even though it may be a bit boring I will give you an outline of our structure. It is a rather simplified picture, but I hope it gives you an idea of how political we are!

The council of the association consists of 39 politicians and 19 library professionals and representatives from library institutions and cultural organizations. The president is always a politician, and so is the 1. vice president. 2. vice president is a library professional.

The politicians are partly elected by the regional associations, partly by the political groups present at the annual general assembly. To be eligible as a politician you must be an elected member of the committee in your municipality responsible for the public libraries.

Underlying this system is a rather complicated election procedure, which secures the political balance in the council.

The point is that the political section of the council of The Danish Library Association should be a correct reflection of the political balance in the local municipalities, which are members of our association.

This is also the reason for having both a political president and a political vice president. If the president belongs to the left wing parties, the vice president should represent the right wing and vice versa.

This carefully composed political balance gives The Danish Library Association a very high degree of political legitimacy, which is one of our strengths in the political world. The weakness is that it is not possible for us to be as radical in our views as the library professionals would often like.

On the other hand it is very difficult for f. instance a Minister of Culture to fail to appreciate our views on public library policy matters, as the minister knows that our views reflect both the views of the local politicians, responsible for the local public libraries, and the library professionals, responsible for carrying out the policies.

Some examples

I will give you a few examples on how our association works in practice:

Denmark got a new Library Act in 2000. It has been called the best library act in the world, creating the legal framework for the new hybrid library by for instance securing that all public libraries provide free Internet access.

Prior to the legislative work was a fierce debate on payment versus free access to the services of the public libraries.

In the Library Association the same debate was reflected in board meetings and council meetings, ending up in a clear position, defending the free access to library services as a fundamental right in a democratic society.

We presented this view to the Minister of Culture of that time, and she agreed in its importance, but probably more decisive was that she assessed that when we agreed on it – representing parties from left to right - the principle was likely to hold water in Parliament. So she fought for it, and she won (if we will also win next time the act is revised is a very open

question, as strong voices in our association has started questioning the principle, so we will see!).

And when the European library associations under the leadership of EBLIDA lobbied for improving the European Copyright Directive, on top of the campaign mainly carried out by our secretariat, the secretariat also “used” politicians from our board to get in contact with their party members in the European Parliament to convince them to vote for the views of the libraries. That was very effective.

Annual Meeting

We do not only create the close cooperation between the libraries and their politicians through the cooperation in our regional associations (we have 14, following the Danish county structure), in the board, the council, and the many committees of our associations. One of the main outcomes of our annual meeting is the unique opportunity it makes for the politicians and their library professionals to get to know each other, *and through the political and professional dialogue at the meetings both parties get a much better and more nuanced understanding of the needs and the necessities.*

It is a tradition in many local communities that several members of the Cultural Committee of the municipality together with senior staff of the library attend our annual meeting, *because the mutual inspiration from the meeting is valuable their local work.*

This opportunity cannot be overestimated! A lot of dedicated culture politicians are born here.

The relevance to IFLA

The reason for me standing here to day, telling you this story, is that I believe that the Danish example may be an inspiration to other library associations and to IFLA in its role as the international association of library associations.

Not in such a way that you should copy our structure, which is a result of a specific Danish development, but rather in a way where the concept of a close cooperation between the professionals and the political decision makers gives the library associations more political focus and more political strength.

Over the last year or so we have seen several international and national examples of invisibility of the libraries. I am thinking of The EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning where the role of the libraries was almost completely forgotten. Then came the draft documents in World Summit on the Information Society process, where the libraries – again – played an insignificant role, and nationally we have had several examples of for instance The Ministry of Education systematically forgetting the role of libraries.

How come that this happens over and over again? IFLA estimates that there are more than 250.000 libraries around the world, and when user surveys of popularity of public institutions are carried out the libraries in Denmark always come in as a brilliant number one. More than 65% of the Danish population use the libraries on a regular bases.

Then how come that we are forgotten all the time? One of the common explanations is that it is because libraries are such a matter of course that they don't come to the mind of the bureaucrats when they are writing proposals for their governments.

It may be part of the explanation. Another part of the explanation is that the libraries are not good enough in lobbying and communicating outside their own fora.

Cooperation with the politicians is one of the ways out of this situation – even though I reluctantly have to admit that in spite of us already doing so, we still have problems being recognized!

Still the cooperation has many advantages, for instance it forces the librarians to become more result oriented, as politicians want to achieve something if they get involved. And of course the politicians have the network necessary to get in contact with the national decision makers more easily than most librarians.

But most important is that it changes the focus in the library association and gives it a clearer and expressed political goal, which is an important instrument in becoming outgoing and proactive.

The possible disadvantage - seen from a professional point of view - is that the cooperation with the political system requires the ability to compromise. You may need to kill one or two of your darlings in order to get other things you want more, and ideal solutions are very, very rare.

In The Danish Library Association the choice was made many years ago, and the result is that The Danish Library Association today is a powerful and respected partner in the political process as well as in the professional world

In closing I want to emphasize that I think it is extremely important to support IFLA in its effort to change its focus to become a much stronger lobby organization for the worlds libraries. The libraries need a strong global voice to ensure all citizens access to information. Therefore we should support the ongoing work, and its my hope the MLA section will play an active role in this transition.

Thank you very much for your attention.