

**Speech for the Opening Ceremony of APLAP
Conference by the Speaker the Hon. Bob Halverson.
20 October 1996.**

Mr Karl Min Ku, President of the Association of
Parliamentary Librarians of Asia and the Pacific,
members and friends.

On behalf of the Australian Parliament, I would like to
extend a warm welcome to you all to the Australian
Parliament for this Fourth APLAP Biennial conference.

As information specialists and advisers to your
parliaments, you perform a crucial, though frequently
unacknowledged, role in the governance of your
countries. It is a role which will become still more
important as the global village truly becomes reality.

Knowledge, timely and relevant, is an indispensable adjunct of power.

The ability to access, and use information has always given those who possess that information significant advantage over those who are denied it. I believe this is true whatever the arena.

In the last decade advances in communication and information technologies have been astounding. We can now not only access more information but do so at an immeasurably faster pace. If anything, we are perhaps fast reaching the stage of information overload.

The rapidity with which the Internet has adapted from its humble beginnings to being the means by which millions, or tens of millions, of people around the world communicate is but the most startling and pervasive example.

The range of uses to which the Internet can be put, and the almost anarchistic nature of its modus operandi, exemplifies the new challenges for all in the information business.

While many Parliaments, including ours, are frequent and productive users of the Internet and have our own sites, we are confronted with the irony that many parliamentary libraries in the region still lack even basic resources of up-to-date reference books and journals, let alone the technical expertise and hardware to access this and other electronically available sources of information.

We can, of course, be overwhelmed by technology. We need to remember that, while technology can provide huge amounts of information and data, they are of little use unless skilfully culled, interpreted and made relevant to the immediate requirements of users. Technology cannot perform this function.

It is essential that parliaments have trained and experienced staff, to provide summaries, highlights, assessments and perhaps alternative interpretations of those bare facts. For parliaments, these human resources are fundamental.

Parliament occupies a key position in the democratic process since it is the focal point between government and citizens.

Parliaments hold executives accountable for policies and administration through questions, debates, committees and enquiries.

As the highest political forum of nations, parliamentary activities are observed and reported by the media and by other big and small organisations when their interests are affected.

Moreover, the activities of Parliament, culminating with its law-making function, affect the lives of all within a country and, in many cases, beyond its borders. All these require that relevant, accurate and timely information be made available to parliamentarians.

Legislators are increasingly confronted with more complex public policy considerations as society evolves and new issues and problems emerge. For most of these new problems the solutions and perspectives of the past are no longer valid or relevant.

Additionally, many problems such as pollution, climate change, HIV/AIDS and drugs trafficking transcend national borders. Elected representatives have to find new and co-operative ways to combat them. We are no longer encapsulated in our own society nor can we go back in time.

Parliamentarians come from all walks of life and vary in terms of knowledge, experience and expertise. Once elected, we are expected to deal intelligently with complex issues - even if sometimes these may be matters of which we know little, if anything. We need help and advice.

To give one example of direct relevance to all our institutions, readily and easily accessible comparisons of legislative responses of individual parliaments to specific issues, would help us all determine possible common approaches without the need to reinvent the wheel.

Armed with professional assistance of this kind, parliamentarians will not only contribute qualitatively to debate on the issues of the day, but will evaluate and demand action on problems of constituents and those facing the country. Democracy is meaningless without public accountability.

Ideally, given the importance of parliament's role in the polity, a parliamentary library should be a principal source of accurate and timely information for the members of that parliament.

Its mission must be to provide quality information services, research and policy advice to all its members in confidence.

The ideal is not always achievable given limited - resources and other constraints.

It is important in the interest of good governance of all our countries to ensure that a viable and sustainable system of information provision and exchange be established and, in the light of different resources and capacities, shared among parliamentary libraries in the region.

You will be considering in detail over the next few days the conference theme "Regional Co-operation - Making it Happen".

Since APLAP was established in 1990, this process may be said to have already begun. The results so far, however, have not been commensurate with the importance of the task or the benefits that could flow to individual parliaments and the region generally.

In hosting this conference, the Australian Parliament is saying that it hopes that APLAP, while recognising the limits of resource constraints, will recommend ways to ensure that the **Action Plan 1994-96** with its many practical ideas, will be achieved in the near future.

I know that various models of regional co-operation will be considered in the next few days and I look forward to the adoption of a preferred model as a positive result of this conference.

The Australian Parliament has played an important role in encouraging regional co-operation.

In the area of information services, the then Presiding Officers in 1983-84 undertook a survey, through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, of eleven parliamentary libraries of Pacific island states. We subsequently provided not only basic reference materials and books but also a basic training course for staff.

We have also from time to time provided reference books to new parliaments such as those of Cambodia and Vietnam.

Within the South West Pacific region, we continue to respond to individual requests from its parliaments and members on an ad hoc basis. A more established co-operative system will be of mutual benefit not only for the libraries but also for parliamentarians.

The status of parliamentary library services depends ultimately on their recognition and importance to the health of the democratic process by both sides of the political divide. A comprehensive service will help legislators not only to be informed in a timely manner, but will contribute to outcomes that benefit citizens.

The existence of a regional co-operative parliamentary library service, easily accessible to members, will ensure that governments are responsive to the people through Parliament. This, after all, is the *raison d'être* of Parliament.

In conclusion, I wish you a productive conference and trust that the activities of APLAP in the future will help strengthen good government and democracy in the region. It gives me great pleasure to declare open the Fourth Biennial conference.