

# Unity before unification? South Africa's LIS organisations and the prospects for a single structure

Colin Darch

*'Forgive your enemies but remember their names.'* - Robert Kennedy [attrib.]

## Introduction

I intervene in the unity debate with considerable diffidence, for several reasons, not the least of which is that I have spent much of my working life in countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Tanzania, where the main difficulty has been a weakness or even a lack of professional LIS associations, rather than the plethora of them which is the special heritage of apartheid.<sup>1</sup> I am personally more accustomed, therefore, to a situation in which most practitioners would probably welcome a strong association per se, at least initially.

There is also a clear danger that this particular debate could become one characterised as much by interest and emotion as by reasoned positions.

It is not my intention to rehearse here the history of how SAILIS and LIWO arose as different organisations.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it's important in my view to say that LIWO can and should be proud of its past. It has been, in Christopher Merrett's phrase, 'an organisation of givers rather than takers, it has been an organisation in which the ordinary LIS practitioner's voice is heard, an organisation committed to the identification and satisfaction of the needs of ordinary users'. This is not a tradition which should be lightly given up or surrendered.

What I want to do here today is to raise some points around the unification question for consideration, looking briefly at the example of some other countries where unity has been an issue, and perhaps to open up a debate on what LIWO's position should be regarding the current initiatives for organisational unification. Let me state explicitly that I am not myself opposed to unification nor to unity: but I believe that these 'good things' must be based on something more substantial than warm and fuzzy feelings of goodwill, even supposing that such feelings do in fact exist among us.

Democratic freedom is, as Rosa Luxemburg once said, above all freedom for the one who thinks differently. It is therefore probably worth saying that we need to be very careful indeed in making implicit or explicit comparisons between the situation regarding the LIS associations and, for example, the South African sporting federations. There is a big difference between unifying, let us say, three rugby organisations established along race lines during apartheid, on one hand, and the politically divergent LIS organisations, on the other. The rugby

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word 'professional' in this paper inclusively, and *not* to distinguish practitioners with diplomas of one sort or another from those without.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of what makes LIWO worth fighting for, see Christopher Merrett, 'LIWO at a crossroads: its past, present and future in national and international perspective,' *LIWOLET* vol. 5, no. 4 (October-December 1994), p. 1-4.

associations all agree on the rules of their game; they were divided in the interests of racial politics. But LIWO and SAILIS are actually in fundamental disagreement over what LIS practitioners really do, and especially how they do it; and over what membership associations are supposed to be like. We do think differently.

Before going any further, it is probably useful to define the terminology which we are using. It seems to me that an important distinction should and indeed must be made between 'unification', meaning the administrative union of two or more separate organisations, and 'unity', meaning the holding of broadly similar or compatible social and political viewpoints by most or all of a defined population (in this case, the community of LIS practitioners).

We need to be very careful, in my view, not to confuse or conflate the two. Matthew Syphus appears to do exactly this when he argues in a recent article that

[w]ithin a profession that is numerically small in this country and at the best of times struggles worldwide for a higher profile in society, [the existing] suspicion and lack of trust among South African LIS practitioners seem sheer lunacy.<sup>3</sup>

What Syphus seems to be saying is that since *unification*, in the organisational sense, would probably give South African LIS practitioners a higher public profile, it is 'lunacy', to use his own term, for us not to put aside our suspicions over political or philosophical differences. But these philosophical differences are not merely obstacles to organisational unification: for many of us, they represent an important part of why we became information workers in the first place, and continue to be part of our social identity as LIS practitioners.

### **Unity and unification in other times and places**

The essentially normative and prescriptive idea that there should be a single membership association for LIS practitioners in a given country is not new. Indeed, the library association history of various other countries shows us that in many respects, the South African situation is not all that different from the rest of the world. And in many cases, the differences between associations were fundamentally political ones. I don't want to spend too much time making this point, so I am going to refer briefly to some countries in which the inability or unwillingness of LIS practitioners to 'speak with one voice' - usually the voice of the library establishment - seems comparable to our own situation. The literature also includes discussion of similar problems in such countries as India and Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Syphus, "Towards a LIS association for all: a critical reassessment of the position of SAILIS with regard to a unified profession," *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* vol. 63, no. 1 (1995), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> In terms which may sound familiar to us, G. L. Trehan calls for an All-India Convention of Librarians to achieve unifications of existing associations as a federation in 'Unity of librarians and ILA,' *Indian Librarian* vol. 36, no. 1 (June 1981); S. Hossain makes a similar appeal for unity in 'Library associations in Bangladesh,' *International Library Review*, vol. 13, no. 3 (July 1981), p. 323-327.

### **The British example**

The history of the relationship between the Association of Assistant Librarians (AAL) and the (British) Library Association (LA), is a case in point, and illustrates the dangers of the acceptance of the role of a 'ginger group': ginger groups only work inside really democratic structures.<sup>5</sup>

The LA absorbed the previously independent AAL as a 'section' on 1 January 1930, under an agreement reached in the previous year, 1929. The LA was seen at that time - justifiably - as a club mainly for the directors of large public libraries, rather than for librarians in general, or even for academic or special LIS practitioners. The AAL, on the other hand, was somewhere between a trade union and an association for middle level librarians and LIS students, with a tradition of critical outspokenness. As an LA section, the AAL retained its own constitution and self-government. But this joining-together was nonetheless, in the words of one account, 'more controversial than the other unions [with independent associations]'.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, by 1935, in a blatant manoeuvre, the LA was unsuccessfully attempting to close the AAL down as a section, and replace it with a simple category of 'student membership' of the main body. Even as late as the 1960's, relations between the AAL and the LA were still strained, and the AAL was not permitted to make any public pronouncements except through the central body. It was widely believed at the time that at least one potential scandal was suppressed by this mechanism. The AAL is now in decline, and is seeking a role around such issues as training and working conditions.<sup>7</sup>

### **The case of the United States**

In the late 1940's, the issue of 'unity' via a single membership organisation was also raised in the United States. In an article published in 1948, M E Lord argued that the American Library Association (the ALA) might become a federation, including such outside bodies as the Special Libraries Association (the SLA) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (the ACRL).<sup>8</sup> The ALA itself would assume the role of an umbrella structure for the federation, and would be limited to four clearly defined tasks:

1. administering the membership procedures;
2. performing a general public relations role for libraries;
3. lobbying on behalf of the interests of libraries within the United States; and
4. maintaining relations with libraries and library organisations in other countries.

Clearly, this did not in fact happen. The SLA remains to this day a separate organisation with

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<sup>5</sup> Again, Merrett makes this point: see his paragraph (c), op cit., p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> W. A. Munford, *A history of the Library Association, 1877-1977* (London: Library Association, 1976), p. 192-193. Between the lines of Munford's official account there is clearly a sub-text.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Lowe, 'The Association of Assistant Librarians: waving or drowning?' *Assistant Librarian* vol. 82, no. 7 (July 1989), p. 96-100.

<sup>8</sup> M. E. Lord, "Unity offers ALA needed strength," *Library Journal* vol. 73 (1 June 1948), p. 845-850.

its own membership; the ACRL is subordinate to the ALA; but most importantly, the ALA is very much more than a mere umbrella structure. Members join the ALA and then choose membership of various interest groups. They do not, for example, join the ACRL and only then become members of the ALA as a consequence.

The ALA does include some broadly progressive and even radical groupings, such as the Intellectual Freedom Round Table and the International Relations Round Table, but these operate within the framework of the parent organisation's policies. The organisation's own official history, published in 1978, admits that the ALA remains a divided and insecure body, despite its apparent public confidence.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, a recent candidate for the presidency of the ALA even felt it necessary to include an appeal for unity in his electoral statement.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that the United States does not present us with an example of a nation with a single and united profession. In a survey done nearly twenty years ago, it was reported that there were at that time an astonishing seventy-five library and librarian associations in the United States, the smallest of which had fourteen members. The total does not include the various special interest chapters and sections of the ALA, nor, importantly the local state associations, such as the Texas Library Association, of which there are presumably fifty.<sup>11</sup> I have no reason to suppose that there are significantly less organisations today.

### **The French National Library**

Even in countries where there is apparent unity, closer examination shows the cracks under the paper. In France, the Bibliothèque Nationale (BN: National Library) refused to have anything to do with the Association des Bibliothécaires Français (ABF: French Association of Librarians) for over sixty years, from 1906 until 1969, because the BN felt that it was already the most important LIS institution in the country.<sup>12</sup>

When the BN finally did agree to join the ABF, it did so as a special and separate section which holds its own meetings apart from the parent body.

### **LIWO, ULIS and the unification question**

What can we learn from all this, if anything? It is my belief that LIWO must ask itself some fundamental questions. These, I propose, might be at least the following - unity to what purpose? unification on what conditions? and unification through what process?

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<sup>9</sup> Dennis Thomison, *A history of the American Library Association, 1876-1972* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Gorman, 'Candidates for ALA president share their plans,' *College and Research Library News* vol. 56, no. 4 (April 1995), p. 268.

<sup>11</sup> Peggy Sullivan, 'Library associations,' *Library Trends* vol. 25, no. 1 (July 1976), p. 135-152.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lethève, 'Les rapports de l' Association des Bibliothécaires Français et de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris,' *Bulletin d'Informations de l'Association des Bibliothécaires Français* no. 114, (First Quarter 1982), p. 3-4.

### **Unity to what purpose?**

It seems to me that unification is not a given requirement. There may be powerful arguments in favour of unification, but they are not yet being made, apart from the idea that there is a need for LIS practitioners to speak with a single voice if we are to be heard. Certainly LIS practitioners must make input into the policy process, but I doubt whether the existence of a single association would have prevented the CEPD process, for example, from committing the grave procedural errors which it did.

We must unpack this idea of a 'single voice' to find out if it is valid. We must also ask which issues this single voice will address, and whose voice it will be.

The real need, in my view, is not so much for a single voice, as for learning the skills of lobbying, following through, exploring contacts in government, and so forth. These are new skills in the South African context. For instance: Kader Asmal, at a book launch at the University of the Western Cape, before the April 1994 election, and while he was still a professor of law, promised to work for the abolition of Value Added Tax (VAT) on books, which he correctly called a tax on knowledge. This has not happened. We know that Kader Asmal, now an MP and a minister, is a friend of libraries - so why have we (LIWO, SAILIS or whomever) not followed up on his public promise and held him to it? Clearly this is an organisational problem, and has nothing to do with unification, in the sense that even divided we are often ineffective.

If we want to be heard, what are the issues we want to speak to? Is organisational unification a prerequisite for LIS practitioners speaking with a single voice? I think not. More important is the idea that members of organisations feel that they are being properly represented by those organisations. If, in addition, positions are held in common, then campaigns can be waged in common.

In fact, there is now a properly constituted forum, TRANSLIS, in the process of formation. TRANSLIS seems to me to be an entirely appropriate mechanism for dealing with joint lobbying issues.

### **Unification on what conditions?**

The question of the conditions which would make unification possible is a difficult one. Let us accept for a moment the doubtful proposition that unification is both desirable and actually desired, and that prior unity also exists; and assume also that the three membership organisations will dissolve themselves and form a new professional association. The difficulty remains, how will this happen? What will the mechanisms be? What principles will be followed? Certainly nothing has emerged from the ULIS process yet to answer these questions.

But if there are no clear guidelines agreed by all sides, there will be no guarantee that a hypothetically 'new' association will not rapidly assume the character of the old one. Indeed,

Merrett has already argued that the dissolution of existing associations and the formation of a single new structure

‘will introduce new faces into the national power structure which [...] will be as monolithic, bureaucratic and orthodox as its predecessor.’<sup>13</sup>

This may not be an inevitable consequence, but it is hard to disagree that it is a highly probable one.

This is not least because unification between organisations which differ in size is always problematic. If they are democratic organisations, the smaller group becomes a permanent minority; if they are not, then the smaller group loses its voice altogether. If a shark swallows a sardine, are they united? I think that there is an urgent need for LIWO to develop a clear national position around the question of unification on what conditions, which depends on the first question, unity to what purpose?

### **Unification through what process?**

LIWO is presently in an awkward position with regard to the process by which unification might be achieved. The existence of the ULIS committee, which emerged from the LISDESA conference, with mandated participation from LIWO Western Cape, rather than from a national LIWO structure, means that we are no longer in a position to influence the terms of reference upon which ULIS rests. And these are in fact deeply flawed.

The process is, first of all and above all, teleological - which is to say that the outcome is predetermined - a new association. Point two of the LISDESA conference resolution, passed on 26 January 1995, says that

2. [That the Steering Committee is] to oversee the organisation of a conference within 12 months at which a national library association will be formed.<sup>14</sup>

But where does that decision come from? Is it a mandate from LISDESA? And has LIWO - regionally or nationally - committed itself to this process? Certainly we in the Western Cape are concerned that we are apparently locked into a process which can only have one outcome: our attempts to influence ULIS by proposing a more cautious approach have not been well received.

There are also major problems with regard to the way that the ULIS committee is constituted. These are primarily around the fact that three members of a six-person committee are formally non-aligned raises serious questions of mandate. To whom, apart from the attendees at LISDESA who elected them, and who may never meet again, are these members accountable? What is to prevent them from simply putting forward their own personal viewpoints? And at a more fundamental level, a question arises about the direct participation, in a process to determine the future membership organisations, of persons who are not in fact members of any of those organisations. What definition of ‘stakeholder’ is being used by ULIS? Who are the

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<sup>13</sup> Merrett, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *ULIS Information Sheet* no. 1 (March 1995), p. [2].

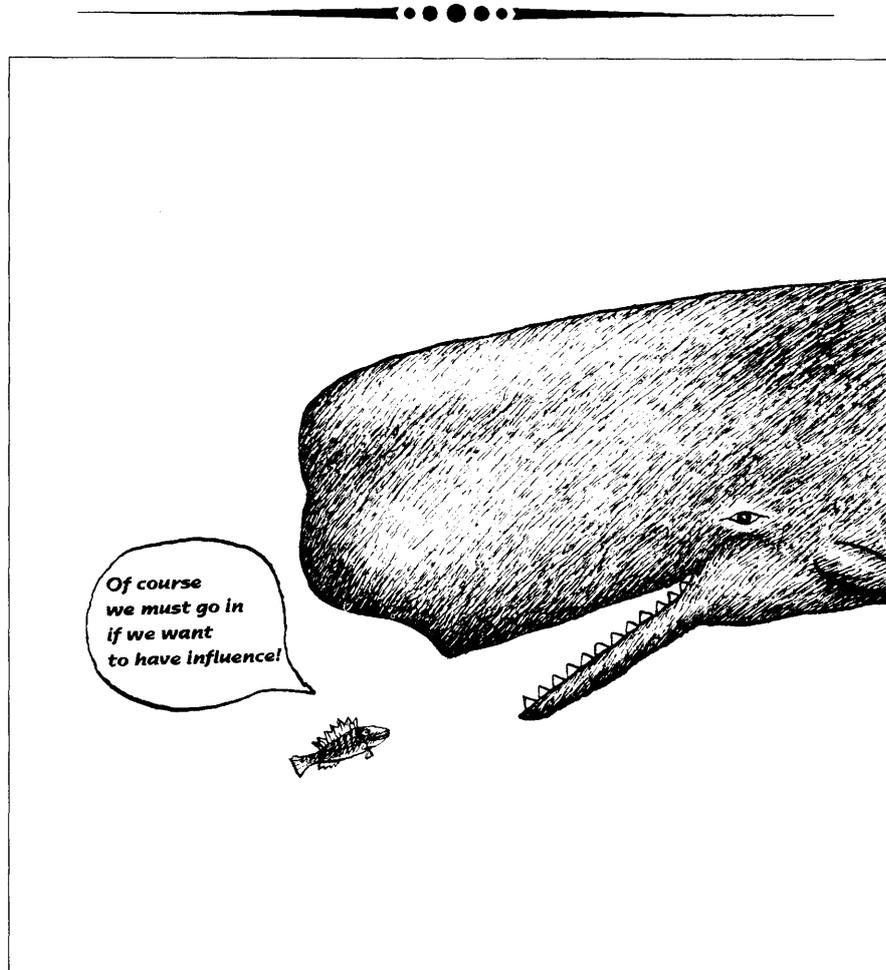
non-aligned members actually representing?

Lastly, there is the problem that ULIS by-passes another legitimate structure, TRANSLIS, which is a forum in the process of being constituted and in which both SAILIS and LIWO are represented, at least in the Western Cape. Why do we need yet another structure? Perhaps it is because of the perceived provincial structure of TRANSLIS, but that has been the organisation's strength in the past, and has not prevented it from taking national initiatives occasionally.

### Opening the debate

In closing, I'd like to repeat some of the propositions which I have put forward in this paper. These are:

- that there is a real and important distinction to be made between unity and unification, and that the second can only flow from the first.
- that we need to ask what would really be the purpose of unity?
- that we need to make explicit the conditions, if any, on which unification would be acceptable to the LIWO membership.
- and that, if unification is desirable, which it may not be, then we also need to identify a process which is acceptable to us for achieving such unification without sacrificing LIWO's achievements and positions.



**Unity before unification?  
South Africa's LIS organisations and  
the prospects for a single structure**

Colin Darch

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