Chairman’s Report 2018

The ASA has just been through one of the most difficult periods in its 55-year history but has emerged as a lean and agile organisation keenly focused on the interests of authors.

The flow of funding from governments has shrunk over the last few years, causing significant disruption.

This cash squeeze contributed to several years of operating without enough capital to even out the dips in cash flow common to member organisations. However, with the recent sale of property (see the Treasurer’s report), the ASA now has working capital and a significant amount to invest, from which future returns can be used to build the ASA.

At the same time, the CEO, Juliet Rogers, and staff have rebuilt internal systems, particularly finance and membership management, to do more with less, while still providing valued member services, and continuing to be the national voice of authors.

However, external threats abound. Corporate interests continue to pour hundreds of thousands of dollars into campaigns agitating to change copyright law. The ASA tirelessly represents author interests, pushing back – along with other industry players – against any weakening of author rights while at the same time advocating sensible changes to the law, such as finding ways for researchers to make full use of library archives.

In the coming year, we will be switching from a defensive position to an offensive one. The ASA will be making a public stand in the lead up to the next federal election by auditing the arts policies of the major parties, either supporting or condemning their strategy.

And we will be releasing a focused plan and inviting political parties to adopt it. Among the points will be the establishment of a digital lending rights scheme to compensate authors for electronic lending of their works by libraries, to add to the current ELR/PLR (established following successful campaigning by the ASA). We also want to see literary prizes become tax free and for authors to be able to average their earnings out over several years for tax purposes, so they don’t get hit with a large tax bill when launching a new work.

Like many similar not for profit organisations, the ASA has an ageing membership, which sadly leads to decay in member numbers. However, membership has started to climb again, albeit slowly, due to a concentrated and targeted effort to create programs and to increase member benefits.

Strength comes from working together and speaking with one voice. If you know an author who isn’t a member of the ASA, encourage them to join, get the benefits of membership, support the wider community of writers and be part of a bigger voice.

This voice, your ASA, has been listening to what members want and has been creating ways to get publication and to promote works. Among the initiatives is Virtual Literary Speed Dating – where members can pitch to a roomful of publishers and agents no matter where they live – and a marketplace program to connect with international publishers seeking rights to Australian works.

More initiatives are coming over the next 12 months, including ways for members from all parts of Australia, and not just major cities, to take part. Watch for announcements hitting your inbox.

The board of the ASA has a new focus and vigour. It has been rejuvenated with new directors, including the appointment of Nicholas Pickard who has substantial experience in the political arena as a lobbyist and as a communications professional. With the recent election of two new directors, the board will have nine members with the ability to appoint a tenth to ensure diversity and additional skill sets.

In the last 12 months the ASA has initiated a string of processes and systems to improve oversight and governance, including more frequent and detailed reporting of finances. The CEO and staff also now have updated systems to send targeted communication to members.

In Canberra, the ASA is an active player in industry bodies, with the Parliamentary Friends of Australian Books and Writers group, and at bookseller and publisher events.

We continue to have three ASA-member directors on the board of the Copyright Agency (an organisation formed by the ASA 44 years ago).

I wish to thank and congratulate the CEO, Juliet Rogers, and her team, for their dedication and fine work over the last year. They are driving the ASA on a clear path, ensuring our resources are put to the best use to benefit members.

I also thank the members of the board of directors, and the executive committee, who volunteer their time without monetary reward and often put in long hours dealing with complex issues.

Additionally, we have two outside investment committee members – Chair Mark Hollands, an author and experienced industry body CEO, and Crystal Hu, an accountant and finance manager – who also provide their time and experience without remuneration, so the ASA can have a measure of independent oversight of its investments. Thank you for your good work.

Thank you all.

Chris Pash

3 November 2018