

The Bookseller

PLR and the government

The article on page 24 of this issue by Michael Holroyd, chairman of the Public Lending Right Advisory Committee, portrays as dark comedy the frustrations of lobbying government. As has often been noted, Prime Minister Tony Blair and his ministers are expert at telling various audiences what they want to hear. So culture secretary Chris Smith has described PLR as offering a "valuable contribution to meeting the objectives of this government". The arts minister, Alan Howarth, has made encouraging observations such as, "We believe that we do have a responsibility, with due tact, to seek support for you", and provided a foreword to the collection of essays celebrating PLR's 20th anniversary. These appeared to be signals that Mr Howarth would be able to present the Treasury with a case that PLR funding should be increased; but the minister, when pushed, insisted that he had to adhere to a previously announced budget. Since Mr Howarth was implying that it had always been the case that he had no room for manoeuvre, Mr Holroyd and other campaigners felt that they had been misled.

Mr Holroyd writes amusingly, but does not conceal his anger at the way this affair has been handled. He has taken the risk of alienating a minister whose sympathy needs to be retained. The PLR campaigners, supported by such prominent figures as Lord Bragg and Baroness

Rendell, are now focusing on the government's next spending review, due in the summer. No doubt Mr Holroyd is confident that their argument remains overwhelmingly strong.

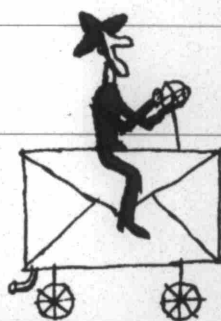
As Mr Howarth himself acknowledged, the case for increased funding of PLR is convincingly made in a document produced by the PLR registrar, Jim Parker. PLR is an "economic" right, akin to copyright; it makes a deserved contribution to authors' incomes, and boosts authors' morale; it is administered with extraordinary efficiency. Since the scheme started, funding has fallen behind inflation by more than 25%. Perhaps the best hope of success,

however, rests on the argument that PLR is linked to three of the government's primary commitments—education, social inclusion, and life-long learning. Let us hope that Mr Smith and Mr Howarth will find a way this summer to put the Treasury's money where their mouths are.

Irving victorious?

The historian Andrew Roberts argued in the *Sunday Telegraph* this week that David Irving, in spite of the judgment against him, emerged as the victor from his court action against Penguin and Deborah Lipstadt. The case had allowed Mr Irving to orchestrate free publicity, and would help to sell copies of his new biography of Winston Churchill.

It is certainly true that Mr Irving's defeat will not have weakened the commitment of his allies on the far right. However, one might have hoped that the damning words of Mr Justice Gray would finally destroy his credibility among historians and general readers. Perhaps this hope is naïve. Donald Cameron Watt and John Keegan, distinguished writers both, last week argued respectively that "the truth needs an Irving's challenges to keep it alive" and that Mr Irving "still has much that is interesting to tell us". The judge had said that Mr Irving, in order to promote vile views, "persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence". Among some, it seems, a reputation for diligent research can survive this indictment.



letters

Alive and selling

In response to the recent feature in *The Bookseller* (17th March) on the closure of Robbs, I would like to take issue on one or two points. Robbs claims to have been the only independent bookshop in Chelmsford, which is not strictly true. J H Clarke has been established in Chelmsford for more than 150 years, and books have always played a major role in the wide range of merchandise we offer.

I totally agree that the book trade is changing and has become increasingly tough, especially since the arrival in this town of two prominent chains, and another "academic" bookshop. I understand the feelings expressed in the article concerning discounts and location, two major factors we also contend with. Support from publishers is vitally important, now more than ever, if the trade is to continue to offer a range of titles. Independents may be unable to threaten "central buying", but wholesalers are recognising the need for special deals and extra discount, two very appealing offers for struggling one-man bands.

Clarke has accepted the need to diversify its trade to our strengths—not, I regret, books at the present time. But there is opportunity to attract many newcomers to the town, brought here by the recent housing boom in our area, so we intend to continue the fight for our share of the retail market. One opening recently was to acquire the local further education college bookshop from Robbs.

The independent retailers in Chelmsford are decreasing, although not always through lack of trade. Indeed, one has recognised the growth of Internet business, and cut rent expenses, and the largest store, mentioned in the report, having received an offer of £12.5m for their site, would I suggest have been extremely imprudent not to accept.

We are sorry to see the demise of Robbs. Some competition is healthy, but despite the bleak picture painted, do not write the county towns of Essex off yet; Clarkes is still here.

Julia Foster

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The joy of publishing

In a recent *Daily Telegraph* obituary the writer states: "Before (says Comfort) my book, *The Joy of Sex*, writing about sex gave me the impression of being written by non-playing coaches. Dear old Freud probably never witnessed the act of sex except in the mirror."

So let's put the record straight. In 1963, my company Neville Spearman published Inge & Sten Hegeler's Scandinavian bestseller *An A-Z of Love*. We did this with some genuine fear. Apart from the outspoken text the book also carried a great many explicit line drawings, some of which I personally deleted for fear of prosecution.

Then, to be doubly sure, we invited Comfort to look at the text. He passed it as OK and we published to huge acclaim.

Clearly, as a result of Comfort's early acquaintance with the book, he finally saw the prospects and potential sales of *The Joy of Sex*, never of course, so far as I am aware, acknowledging this fact.

But that's part of the publishing game, isn't it?

Neville Armstrong

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